

Christmas Day message from St Luke's Church, Tutshill

The Unlikely Invitees

(Luke 2: 8-12 & 15-20)

Part 1

Growing up, did you have any odd or unlikely Christmas Day traditions? Perhaps you still do! But are you prepared to admit what it is?

There are some strange Christmas traditions around the world. Perhaps many of our traditions appear strange when viewed from other countries.

We have Christmas Trees, and Yule Logs, Turkey with pigs in blankets, and so on. In Japan a popular Christmas lunch is KFC. In Finland the whole family share a sauna. In Caracas, Venezuela, roads are shut so that the congregations can roller skate to their early morning service.

Did anyone have a Christmas stocking this morning?

Growing up me and my brothers and sister had Christmas stockings – with the usual orange and Corgi toy car. We didn't think anything odd about this because it was a family tradition. But we hadn't realised that these stockings, even though they were quite plain, weren't quite as they seemed. They were in fact my grandfather's stump socks – during the first world war, when he was still a teenager, he had a leg amputated because of trench foot rot. The socks had no feet!

A bit like these (*hold up pair of socks*), but they were wider because the leg had been amputated just below the knee.

There are stories behind many of the traditions we share. We may not know or remember the reason why, but we do them anyway. They help us connect with each other and with the generations before us.

And there are stories behind each person of the Nativity with whom we become so familiar. They've always been there, and we take their presence for granted, when really they were unlikely characters.

Let's hear about some of these characters now.

(The Luke 2 reading)

Part 2

We've just heard the angel's invitation to the shepherds out on the hillside. It's one of the many unlikely invitations we read about in the nativity stories.

Another was the unlikely invitation of Mary, a teenage girl, to be the mother of the Saviour of the world. And there was the unlikely invitation to a group of Magi to come and worship the new-born King.

But perhaps the most unlikely invitation of all was to this group of shepherds.

Shepherds in Israel at the time of Jesus' birth had very low social standing, even though originally the Israelites were a people, or descendants, of shepherds – Abraham, Moses and King David were all shepherds.

But shepherds were now shunned in everyday life and not to be trusted. Shepherds had no civil rights. They weren't eligible for judicial offices or even admitted as witnesses in court. Shepherds were one of the groups officially labelled as 'sinners', a class of despised people.

They couldn't join with others worshipping God in the temple, partly because they were unable to keep themselves clean, both literally and ceremonially (they had to deal with animals and dirt and even dead animals). They weren't welcome to the point of being excluded. They weren't invited.

Now, imagine yourself as one of the shepherds. But it's the 21st century and as modern shepherds you have smart phones with all the features you'd expect with such devices. A useful app' would be one able to keep track all your sheep. I would hope that there would still be the shepherd like banter between you. And with today's technology there's also Facebook and other app's for receiving the latest news.

The announcement of Jesus' birth by angels to the shepherds can be seen as a form of "fast news" in its own context – it was immediate, it was direct, and highly significant.

Why "fast news"?

There was timely delivery: The angels delivered the message promptly, on the very night of Jesus' birth, ensuring that you, the shepherds, were among the first to know.

Like fast news, it aimed to spread critical information quickly.

It was in Breaking News Format: The announcement was clear, concise, and headline-worthy: *"I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people"*.

It was for a Targeted Audience: The shepherds, humble and often overlooked, were chosen as recipients, much like breaking news often targets specific demographics or groups.

The angels give you, the shepherds, an invite to go find the baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger. How do you respond? Do you accept the news at face value, and respond with a "like" or a thumbs up or a happy face emoji? Or are you cynical and dismiss the news as unlikely, or "fake news", after all why give this news to a shepherd?! The original shepherds hurry off to Bethlehem and find the baby just as the angel had said.

How do we respond to this same good news?

Faith and Trust in the Message: The shepherds could have doubted or dismissed the angels' announcement, especially considering their low social status. Instead, they chose to trust the message.

The good news of Jesus' birth invites us, you and me, to trust in God's promises, even when they seem beyond our understanding or appear to contradict our circumstances.

The good news is for "all people," regardless of status, background, or past. We are called to receive this message with humility, recognizing that it's not about us earning God's favour but about accepting his grace, that is, God love and forgiveness.

Like the shepherds, are you willing to believe and act on what you hear?

Eagerness to Seek and Discover: The shepherds didn't delay or debate the plausibility of the news. They "*hurried off*" to Bethlehem to see the baby for themselves.

When we hear the good news, we too should respond with eagerness and curiosity. This might mean seeking a deeper understanding of Jesus through prayer and reading the Bible. Faith is not passive; it calls for action and exploration.

Personal Encounter with Jesus: The shepherds' journey led them to the manger where they met Jesus personally, just as the angels had said.

The invitation to the shepherds is also an invitation to each of us. It isn't enough to only hear the good news; we also have to experience the Saviour for ourselves.

Sharing the Good News: After seeing Jesus, the shepherds couldn't keep the news to themselves. They returned, "glorifying and praising God," and told others what they had seen.

Just as the shepherds shared their joy, we are called to share the good news with others. The good news is a gift for sharing, to bring hope to all people.

Glorifying God in Everyday Life: The shepherds returned to their fields, but their encounter with Jesus transformed them. They glorified God in their daily work and lives.

Encountering Jesus doesn't always mean a change in external circumstances, they were still shepherds, but it does mean a transformed heart. We're called to glorify God wherever we are – in our home and relationships, in our work and everyday actions.

But how are you going to respond?

Are you going to accept the news at face value, and respond with a happy face emoji? Or are you going to remain cynical and dismiss the news as "fake news"? Or are you, like the shepherds, going to accept the invitation to find out more about Jesus for yourself?

The invite from the angels wasn't just for the shepherds. It is for all of us. This includes you and me.

Amen