

LUKE 2:8-20  
PRAISING SHEPHERDS

What makes you sing? We have a friend who, when we were in church together, you could hear him sing; he was completely tone deaf and out of key, but he loved to sing loudly. It is great to hear someone singing like that. What makes you sing? Are you a karaoke fan? Is that when you sing most? Or do you sing in bath, when there's nobody else around to hear you? Does anyone actually sing in the bath? Do you sing at a football match, when your team is winning and you want to celebrate? Or when your team is losing and you want to encourage them on? Is Church the only place you sing, or the place you love most to sing, because you love the hymns and songs and you want to rejoice? We had a friend staying with us at the end of October, Grigori from Ukraine, he has been here in Church; he loves to sing and in the mornings his deep Ukrainian voice would go right through the house as he sang! We weren't entirely sure what he was singing, but the psalms and hymns would be top of the list! You're maybe sitting thinking that you have nothing to sing about; your heart is heavy, weighed down with the troubles of life and the world and "why would I want to sing when life is like that?" I quite understand where you are and how life can be like that at times.

We're going to think about praise and why we might want to praise God. This is one of the most talked-about parts of church life: "I loved these hymns in the service today!" you will say at the end of the service; or "I didn't like any of these hymns today; we couldn't sing them!" For those of us whose job it is to choose hymns for a church to sing, it is a hard task to get the balance right; we try our best. But praise is not just about *what* we sing; it is much more about *why* we sing. Why are churches about the last place in our culture where people sing together? It is not altogether true, but for many people it is the only place where they encounter public singing and are asked to sing in public. Why do churches sing? The simple answer is that we want to praise God, and singing and music has always been the way in which the people of God have celebrated God and His goodness. This hasn't changed and this is what we're going to think about this morning through the experience of the shepherds outside Bethlehem at the time when Jesus was born.

Shepherds were not the most important people round Bethlehem 2000 years ago. They would be written off by most people; ignored and avoided; the popular idea is that they would smell of sheep, whether that's true or not!! It is to the shepherds that the angels came with the good news: "*the angel...*" (Luke 2:10ff) These famous words are at the centre of the story that we tell at Christmas time; the angels announce to the shepherds that a child is born and that this child is the Saviour of the world. It was announced to the shepherds and through them to the world. These are ordinary men, doing a job that few others would want to do; they are sitting on the hillside, watching over their sheep when the peace is disturbed, their night works out to be very different and they have a place in history for ever. God shows the world that His Son has come to save everyone; that's why "shepherds"; Jesus is the Saviour, not for religious people only, nor famous people, nor powerful people only, but for everyone. The shepherds stand for ever as proof of that.

The shepherds react in three ways to this good news:

1. "*Let's go...*" (Luke 2:15) Off they go to Bethlehem. Something has happened in Bethlehem; they have been told about it and off they go. God has done something hugely important for the world; He has told the shepherds and it is hard to convey the sense of urgency they felt, but they go off as quickly as they can to see what it is all about. They take the good news, but they need to investigate it for themselves; they have heard it, but now they need to see it. This is exactly the way we work: we hear

good news about what God has done in Jesus, but before we believe, we have to find it for ourselves; we have to make it ours. The shepherds go to see.

2. *“When they...” (Luke 2:17)* There is a new baby in the family and you are delighted; what do you do? You post his picture on Facebook and your family and friends share it with their friends so that other people see. This is the modern version of telling others! The shepherds tell others what they have seen; their hearts are full of the child in the manger; their hearts full to bursting and I have this picture in my mind of them walking back out of town on their way back to the hills, just as dawn is breaking and just as Bethlehem is waking up to a new day and to everyone they meet, the shepherds are telling them about the child they’ve just visited; “you should go too!” Some will shake their heads at the “silly shepherds”; but others will go, to see for themselves.

3. *“The shepherds...” (Luke 2:20)* Here we come to praise. The shepherds go home singing! I suppose “glorifying and praising” mean much the same thing; they are singing in praise to God for the child they have seen. What they had seen was exactly what the angels had told them; they had told them about the child and they had seen the child; they told them that the child was God’s Saviour for the world and they had seen the Saviour; so they went home singing! They were not disappointed, but their hearts were glad to see Jesus and glad to sing His praise.

Praise is a response to Jesus: the shepherds saw Jesus and went home praising God. Praise is always a response to Jesus. This is the great first answer to the “why” of Christian worship: we respond to Jesus. There are all kinds of ways of understanding Jesus and who He is and what He has done and all of them draw praise from us. Let’s take what the angels say in Luke 2: Jesus is the Saviour; He is the Christ; He is Lord. Jesus the Saviour has come into the world to do something significant for us and He saw His mission coming to its climax on the cross when He died to take away the sin of the world, to bear our sin and to open the door for us to come to God. This is good news for a world labouring under the darkness of sin and evil even yet, that Jesus is the Saviour of the world; we rejoice at that good news. He is the Christ, the God-appointed Messiah, with a focus on the truth that Jesus is literally a God-send for the world; Jesus has come, God has done this! The notion of Jesus as Lord is also huge: “Lord” in the Bible carries with it so much more than Lord Grantham at Downton Abbey; it carries with it ideas of being God, of Kingship, and for us it leads us to Easter and the resurrection when Jesus is seen as Lord in a whole new way. Saviour, Christ, Lord – how huge is Jesus in His importance for the world; He is magnificent.

Now, we’ve been talking a bit on Sunday mornings for the last few weeks about how big Jesus is and sometimes we don’t always see value in these kinds of sermons; you say “be practical and tell us how to live; don’t tell us theology!” But how do we praise if we don’t know why? How do we sing if we don’t have something about Jesus to respond to? How do we believe if we don’t know who we believe and why? Praise in church is not something to be whipped up as an emotion by a charismatic leader; praise in Church is a response to Jesus and only by understanding something important about Jesus can we go home singing! You may like the tunes, but our hearts will be glad only when we understand why we praise. We respond to Jesus and our hearts are glad to know Him and to trust Him because He has done great things for us. Praise is not about being happy all the time; indeed we can praise even when hearts are heavy, because we respond to something good and important about Jesus and we see that, we know that and we are delighted by that! Praise is a response to Jesus.

Praise is also a response to a promise-keeping God. The shepherds were told to go to Bethlehem and they would see something important; they went and they were not disappointed; they found things just as they had been told. 700 years before, Micah was given a promise from God that Bethlehem would be the place where the king was to be born and this king would be full of grace and peace; this small, insignificant place would be the centre of God's mission plans to save the world; it seems unlikely! But that's exactly that happened; God kept His promises and the shepherds' praise is a response to a promise-keeping God. There are all kinds of qualities of God that we could single out: what is it that you like most about God? Here's one: He is a promise-keeping God. God makes promises to us: He promises to be with us always and everywhere; He promises to forgive our sins; He promises to be the help and strength of our lives; He promises to provide for us everything we need. He is a promise-keeping God. We are inspired to praise this promise-keeping God.

The best of our hymns and songs will always lead us to praise and will always tell us why we praise. They will give us a reason for praise. Jesus is the rock of our salvation; our God is a great big God; Make way for Christ the King in splendour arrives. By the words of these hymns we are drawn in to praise God for something of His excellent goodness. Praise is something we do; we sing praise to God whether we're good at singing or not. But praise also comes from our hearts; it comes from sense of delight at what God has done for us and it comes from our faith as we react and respond to the ways in which God has blessed us. This is not about being happy all of the time, but about recognising what God has done and saying 'thank you!'

The shepherds heard the good news; they heard that the Saviour had come, a child was born in Bethlehem who would be the Saviour, who was God's chosen Messiah, who was "Lord". They went to see; they told everyone they met; they praised and glorified God. Read whole story of Jesus' coming for yourself; it won't take you long; visit the manger, encounter Jesus for yourself; see what it means. Tell someone else what you discover about Jesus. Praise God for Jesus; praise God that He keeps His promises. The shepherds were brilliant; they were so full of joy; there was so much of a response and reaction to Jesus. There are times when we say "I've heard it all before; I know it; so what! There is nothing new for me to see!" Yet, we miss so much! Rather, respond to Jesus in all His glory and grace; respond to the God who keeps His promises; let praise fill your heart and let praise sing out of your mouth; praise and glorify God!