

The Catholic Parish of Petworth & Midhurst West Sussex

Fr Peter's Homily for Christmas 2021

'Let us go over to Bethlehem'. As soon as the angels who have brought the joyful news leave, the shepherds themselves are on the move. They are no longer happy to stay where they were. Until a few minutes ago the fields seemed fine to them, but now they don't look the same, they are no longer enough. So the shepherds decide to 'go over' to Bethlehem. And once the decision is taken, there is no time to lose. They are rushing, and what started out as an orderly progress turns into a hectic scramble to get there as soon as possible.

Of course, the shepherds don't need to go to Bethlehem for the story to progress. The Saviour has been born there, whether they go and look or not. He will be no safer, nor will he be any better known, because of their visit. The history of salvation will continue whatever they do; the game is afoot, and nothing can turn it back now. Violent soldiers, insecure kings, toadying prophets, powerful emperors, none of them can stop the story once it has begun, any more than a war or a virus or a plague can: Christ is born for us, and nothing can stop the inexorable march of this story. God does not need the shepherds for his plan to proceed; but the shepherds do need God. The moment the angels left, the shepherds looked around and saw that all that had been so familiar, so normal, so satisfactory, now looks tawdry and cheap and insignificant: it is no longer enough (just as the palaces and luxury of the wise men will look cheap and inadequate, not enough, once they have seen the star). So the shepherds decide that they must 'go over'. They must go from the place that is no longer good enough to the place that is perfection: they must 'go over' to Bethlehem. And having been to Bethlehem they will return to the fields, but they will never be the same again. The image of the Mother in a stable and the baby in a feeding trough, will never leave them and in some sense they will live the rest of their lives 'in Bethlehem', changed into new men by what they saw there. They may have gone back to the fields, but they have left their hearts in Bethlehem.

And what about us? We have heard the same message that the shepherds heard, but what will we do? Will we stay where we are, charmed by a pretty story and the sense of familiarity that comes from tales told again and again, characters we know well, words that we can recite by heart? Will we stay in the fields looking from a distance at the charming sight of a city sleeping under a starry night, still at home here in our familiar surroundings, the life that has grown so familiar? Or will we join the shepherds in their hurry, as they go over, over from the old life, over from the comfortable and the unchallenging, over to Bethlehem? In the fields we might meet angels, and that is good and memorable and will give us stories to tell the grandchildren; but in Bethlehem – ah, in Bethlehem we will see more than angels, we shall see God, we shall see what life might become, we shall see hope, and joy and be washed for a moment in the knowledge that this place is, just for now, the centre of the world. Bethlehem will get to us, it will get into our guts, into our minds, into our souls.

In Bethlehem all the things that now seem so important will fade into the background. Our comfort, our power, our reputation, our possessions, our self-sufficiency, our pride, these melt away into the shadows, and our lives are filled with this very simple sight. An animal's food box, intended to give life to a donkey or two, contains the life of the world. It is a subversive place, Bethlehem, a place that mocks and undercuts our vanity and our self-sufficiency. It is a place that we cannot visit without that trip, in some way, making our lives seem just a little unsatisfactory as they are, a little lacking, a little in need of something more. If any life is to be balanced and grounded in reality, it needs Bethlehem.

'Let us go over to Bethlehem'. If just one of us in the church today throws in our lot with the shepherds, and goes across to Bethlehem, to seek there what life might yet become, then this will be a Christmas to remember. Will you leave the fields behind and hurry across to Bethlehem? Will you take the risk of looking on the child who is our life? Will you live the rest of your life as someone who carries Bethlehem in your heart?

*'And one by one the shepherds, with their snowy feet,
Stamp and shake out their hats upon the stable dirt,
And one by one kneel down to look upon their life.'*

Thomas Merton 'A Christmas Card'

"Let us go over to Bethlehem, says the Church's liturgy to us today. *Trans-eamus* is what the Latin Bible says: let us go "across", daring to step beyond, to make the "transition" by which we step outside our habits of thought and habits of life, across the purely material world into the real one, across to the God who in his turn has come across to us. Let us ask the Lord to grant that we may overcome our limits, our world, to help us to encounter him, especially at the moment when he places himself into our hands and into our heart in the Holy Eucharist."

Pope Benedict XVI Christmas 2012