Bishop Michael’s Christmas Message
December 2022

‘There were shepherds abiding in their field, keeping watch over their flock by night.’

I wonder what comes into your mind as you hear those words from St Luke’s account of the birth of Jesus. Do you imagine lovely Somerset sheep like these brought by their shepherd to a field of lush green grass, hedged and fenced to keep them safely in?

The reality in first century Palestine wasn’t a bit like this. There weren’t any hedges or fences. Unless sheep were enclosed in a sheepfold or cave they couldn’t be left to their own devices. They just wandered off. So wherever you found sheep, you’d expect to find a shepherd looking after them.

And shepherding was done rather differently as well. Where we’re used to seeing a shepherd, perhaps with their sheepdog, herding sheep from behind, first century shepherds led from the front. Their sheep followed them because each member of the flock knew the shepherd’s individual voice, tuned in to hear their particular call.

Which makes me ask, how come it was the shepherds who could hear the voices of the angels who came to tell them about the saviour’s birth? Surely, anyone within a country mile could have been expected to get the message? Yet the scriptures are clear – it’s the shepherds who hear and respond to the angel’s news by being the first to visit the Christ Child.

Could it have been that the shepherds were tuned in to hear the angels’ message, just as their sheep were tuned in to hear their guardians’ calls?

We live in a very noisy world. Lots of the voices around us are angry and violent. We hear the cries of our brothers and sisters caught up in the conflict in Ukraine. We hear the shouts of those who stand on the picket lines.

In all this, who are we tuned in to hear this Christmas? The raised voices around us? Or the song of the angels with their message of peace?

‘Glory to God in the highest! And peace to his people on earth!’

Hearing their voices, will you come with me to see this thing that that has taken place, good news of joy for all people? For the angels call us to encounter none other than a baby, born to us in a stable in Bethlehem! A saviour, who is Christ the Lord!

A very happy Christmas to you all.