



23 December, The Promise and the Gift

The Gift evokes a response – The Most Reverend Bashar Warda

Luke 2:15-18

When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, 'Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us.' So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them.

In Jesus' time, shepherds were a marginalised people, yet they were guardians who made their living by watching and praying, just as Jesus asked his three disciples to in the Garden of Gethsemane before his crucifixion.

God is always calling for shepherds; he needs good shepherds like David who received the good news 1,000 years before the birth of Christ and acted upon it.

In contrast to the rich man Jesus addressed, they, like the apostles, left their possessions and responsibilities behind, after they heard the good news from the Lord to go to Bethlehem.

The message of the angels evoked a dialogue among the shepherds that may not have been there before. In Christ, a new relationship starts between them. The good news is not a message for individuals, but one to evangelise all people to God. It is not simply a message to be obeyed, but to create a community, a people of God, faithful to Him and His Church.

People were amazed by what the shepherds told them - that marginalised people were blessed by being given such a message and that the Messiah was to be born poor and excluded like them. We have a responsibility to amaze others like the shepherds when we witness, talk, write, communicate the messages of God to others, just as the prophets did before. In our world of doubts, fears and troubled minds our words should always be of amazement when talking of Christ.

It is once the shepherds have witnessed the baby Jesus that they begin to spread the news. Sometimes we hurry to share news, before we really know the facts. But the shepherds went in person, and gave witness after seeing the Truth. This is why we should continue to come to church regularly, to listen, pray and to witness. How can we pass on His message without hearing it?

In the story of the birth of Jesus, everyone is on the road to Bethlehem. God wants us to go and find him, however long the journey may be. In response, we should walk faithfully with the gifts God has given us.

Over centuries of persecution and war, Middle East Christians have walked faithfully as they seek roads to refuge. It is often demanding, testing and tiring on the road to Emmaus. But He is always with us and accompanies us on our journeys.

My message to you is that Middle East Christians need your witness to our suffering as we try to survive against those who wish to eradicate us from the land of the birth of Christianity. Bethlehem is 700 miles from where I was born in Baghdad.

When I was born we had over 3 million Christians in Iraq; now we have less than 250,000. Please pray and witness for us.

May God grant you the strength to do this and to also carry the good news to the whole world.

The Most Reverend Bashar Warda is Archbishop of Erbil in the Chaldean Catholic Church, Kurdistan, Iraq.

Prayer:

God of surprises, kindle in us a response of amazement to your presence with us. Let us witness both to the truth of the world's anguish, not least in the Middle East, and to the hope we share with our sisters and brothers there in the Truth of the Incarnation revealed in Bethlehem 2000 years ago. Amen.

Follow-up action:

If you'd like to find out more about the lives of our Christian partners in the Middle East, make sure you check out our blog: www.embraceme.org/blog