

## WHY SHEPHERDS

→ Earlier this year a baby boy was born to a young married couple. He was their first child and as in any family, news of his arrival was eagerly anticipated by the couple themselves and the child's grandparents and other relatives. But news of this child's arrival was eagerly anticipated by many other people not just in this country, but around the world. Why? Well, the child, of course, was Prince George, son of William and Kate and therefore heir to the throne of this country! – *Show powerpoint slide with image of George.*

..... When George was born back in July, Leslie, Laura and I were on holiday in Italy, and here's how we learned of George's birth – *Play Italian birth announcement.*

.....We may have been in a different country at the time and the announcement may have been made in a language that we don't normally speak, but there was no doubt about the content of the announcement. There were enough words in there and enough familiar scenes to give it away! A boy was born! A special boy! A precious boy! A boy whose life would be significant for many people! A boy whose life may well make a difference to many people!

.....And of course that news was heard all over the world by ordinary people like you and me, but also by heads of state and members of the aristocracy, by presidents and governors, by political figures and celebrities as well as by the family and friends of William and Kate. Much of the world would have been aware of the birth of Prince George of Cambridge almost as soon as it happened!

→ Contrast that with the birth story we have heard again tonight. Mary is with Joseph in Bethlehem in a humble place – a stable or a cave, probably surrounded by animals. Mary labours to deliver her first born Son and once he is born, like any father, God wants to spread the news. And he sends out a birth announcement like no other we have ever known using angels to tell the good news.

.....But the twist in this story and the contrast with the announcement of the birth of Prince George, lies in who receives the news! There in Bethlehem the King of Kings and the Lord of Lords was born. This was the biggest event in human history. But the Mayor of Bethlehem isn't told, nor the High Priest in Jerusalem. Caesar and the members of the Royal Court aren't on the receiving end of the message. None of the powerful or well known or respected people are told anything. The birth is announced to a group of shepherds on the outside of Bethlehem!

.....And so naturally we ask the question – why shepherds? Why not people whose story would have been more readily believed? Well, there may be many reasons why God chose to reveal this exciting news to shepherds, but tonight I want us to briefly think about two of them. First of all, by giving the message to the shepherds, God gives us a glimpse into the nature of Jesus' future ministry as the Good Shepherd. Many of the great leaders in the history of the nation of Israel had a link with shepherding. Moses was called whilst looking after his father's sheep. King David was a shepherd boy when he was anointed by Samuel as King of Israel. So, Jesus would be a shepherd in the line of other great shepherds in the history of the Israelite people. And Jesus embraced this description when he called himself the Good Shepherd.

.....Being a shepherd is jolly hard work. There's never a day off. The sheep need constant care and attention. They couldn't be left alone for a moment, so shepherds had to be totally committed to their sheep; feeding them, protecting them; watching over them. Those are just the characteristics that Jesus displayed in his ministry as he spent time with people and it's the way he longs to look after us today. So, it's perhaps poignant that God would choose to tell shepherds that not only was a child born, not only was the Good Shepherd born but a Saviour was born – the Lamb of God was born.

→ And secondly, God chooses to give the message to the shepherds because he intentionally seeks out and uses those that others overlook or disregard. The shepherds who received the good news that night were social outcasts. They didn't fit in with the culture around them. They were always travelling and moving with their sheep so they didn't have much of a home life. They certainly didn't have a nine to five job, weren't married with 2.2 children or own a semi-detached house with a two car garage. They were wanderers in a society that didn't really have much room for people like that.

.....Rightly or wrongly, they often had the reputation of being thieves. They couldn't be trusted and they certainly didn't look good or smell good. They were uneducated and unsophisticated and they were also religiously unclean because the very nature and timing of their work meant that they couldn't be at the temple regularly. And when they did show up there, they got those looks which said, "What are you doing here? Your kind doesn't belong here!" The shepherds were outcasts and overlooked and not good enough in the eyes of the rest of the world!

.....But God chooses to give the good news to the shepherds because that way God gets all the glory. By using people that others think are second rate, God displays his power. People would have been amazed at the message which the shepherds had received. Shepherds wouldn't normally know that kind of thing, so God gets all the glory. And still today, God often chooses to work through people that others would overlook and reminds us all that the good news of the birth of Jesus Christ is for everyone.

→ I know that it won't be universally true, but the birth of Prince George was good news for many people. It brought joy to many people and it certainly was big news across the world. But, the birth of that special boy earlier this year, pales into insignificance against the birth of another baby boy in a manger in Bethlehem many years ago. That birth truly is good news for all and God tried to ensure that we realised that by breaking the news to those who were often overlooked and treated with suspicion.

.....The news which the angels brought that night is for you! Whether you are someone who feels overlooked, or whether you are sometimes tempted to overlook others; whether you find it hard to relate to those that are different to you or you feel as if you are one of those that are left out, the good news is for you! "To you a Saviour is born, Christ the Lord!" Let him be born in you this Christmas. Allow him to show you what a difference he can make to your life and then you will have good news that you want to share with the whole world!