

Migdal-Eder.

We sing at Christmas about the shepherds who announced the birth of the baby at Bethlehem. It was indeed shepherds who were the first to hear the good news. But why them? Why shepherds rather than carpenters or fishermen or farmers?

Jewish tradition was clear and consistent about the fact that the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem. According to this same tradition, it was also very clear that the news of the birth would be announced from a region called *Migdal-Eder*, a region just next to the village of Bethlehem. *Migdal-Eder* was one of the places where Jacob grazed his flocks of sheep, Jacob whose story is told towards the beginning of the Old Testament. (**Genesis 35 : 21**) So you can see that *Migdal-Eder* is a very old name. Two thousand years before Jesus-Christ, there were sheep on the lands of *Migdal-Eder*.

The name has a particular meaning: "*Migdal*" means "tower" and "*Eder*" means "flock". So it is "the tower of the flock". You see, there were no shepherds at ground level in this part of Israel. Rather, they stationed themselves in a high tower, from where they could see far across the whole area. And according to the Jewish Bible commentators, it was in this region that the birth of the Messiah would be announced.

There is something strange about this story of *Migdal-Eder*, however; something that stands out. You see, in Israel, there weren't, in fact, any fields for grazing the sheep. The sheep always grazed on the hillside. So why was there a field set aside for the sheep at *Migdal-Eder*, with its special tower? Why was there this one exception to the rule?

It's because there was one flock that couldn't graze on the hillside and needed a special field. This flock needed shelter and food all year long. This flock needed to stay close to Jerusalem all the time. I'm talking about the sheep that were going to be sacrificed in the temple. There is every reason to believe that the shepherds in the story of Christmas weren't looking after ordinary flocks of sheep; rather, they were the shepherds responsible for taking care of the sacrificial lambs for the temple.

Jesus was born at Bethlehem with a very precise purpose. He was born to die at Calvary, on a cross. He was, as John the Baptist announced, **"the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the**

world!” (John 1:29) Who better to announce His birth than shepherds? And who better among the shepherds than those of *Migdal-Eder*, who looked after the lambs that were going to be sacrificed in the temple at Jerusalem?

Since the earliest times of the Patriarchs at the beginning of the Old Testament, the Jews knew the meaning of a lamb. Every morning and every evening, a lamb was sacrificed in the temple. At Easter, each Jewish household had to sacrifice one. The lamb died in the place of the men and women, and symbolically carried their sin. But all these sacrifices were only a picture/an illustration of the one true sacrifice to come - that of the Messiah.

The baby at Bethlehem did not stay in the manger! He grew up and became a unique person - God and man in one being. He lived a perfect life; He taught with an authority that no-one else had; He controlled the forces of nature in a way that no-one else has ever done. He claimed to be God!

Jesus, the Messiah, said very clearly that He had come **“not ... to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many”**. (Matthew 20:28) The pathway from the manger was always going to lead to the cross. But, on the third day after the cross, God raised Jesus from the dead, back to life!

For many people, God belongs in a box labelled “religion”; joy and happiness are found somewhere completely different. And yet the truth is that God is the one who satisfies our hunger for happiness and wholeness. There is, in each one of us, a need / a yearning that cannot be satisfied by all the parties, all the music, all the money, and even all the love that this world can provide. God alone can satisfy this need - and He wants to do so.

The good news of Christmas is that God loves us; He has always loved us. He loves us so much that He came down from heaven the first Christmas time to rescue us, so that we might know His love and receive His gift of life.

Since the first man and woman turned their back on God, it had been impossible for us to always do what we know to be right and to always avoid doing what we know to be wrong. Despite our best efforts, there is bad in each one of us and all of our friendships and relationships are affected. The consequences are obvious - in our families, in our communities, and in society in general.

But, most of all, it is our relationship with God that has been spoiled - the God who created us; the God who still loves us. This God is pure and holy, but we are not. He cannot allow our dirtiness to approach Him, even though He loves us. There is a barrier between us and our God - a barrier called sin - and there is nothing that we can do from our side to break through it.

However, at the first Christmas, God broke through the barrier from His side. He came down into our dirty, spoilt world in the person of Jesus-Christ in order to rescue us. That is the reason that Jesus came to Bethlehem; it the meaning of His name: "**He will save his people from their sins.**" (Matthew 1:21)

Jesus came to free us from our guilt; to stay close to us in moments of fear and loneliness; to fill us with love; to show us how to live here on earth; to restore the spoilt relationship with Father God; to offer us eternal life - through His own death and resurrection.

The Bible says about Jesus, the Messiah: "**Though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that through his poverty you might become rich.**" (2 Corinthians 8:9) The pathway from the manger was always going to lead to the cross.

We are not here this evening simply to carry on an old tradition. We are gathered here because God is alive and, by grace, God is here with us! He loves us individually; He is interested in each one; He knows us perfectly - our good side and our bad side; and despite the fact that, like the first man and woman, we turn our backs on Him, He still wants to make Himself known to us and share our lives and bless us, if we ask His forgiveness for all that is wrong in us, if we change direction in order to follow Him, and if we put our trust in Him, giving Him his rightful place as Lord of our life.

It's not at all surprising that, as the Christmas story tell us, the Bethlehem shepherds "**returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen.**" (Luke 2:20) If you were to put your trust in Jesus this Christmas, you could do the same as those shepherds.