Sermon

Text: Luke 2.20

‘The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.’

First Sunday of Christmas

31st December 2017

by Edward Carter
Some words from the gospel reading we’ve just heard: ‘The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.’ Familiar words from the Christmas story – but words that are still powerful and very important for us as 2017 comes to a close.

What have you heard and seen this Christmas?

The TV and Radio rankings are just being published, and no doubt the well-known soaps are up there in the top ten – Eastenders, and Coronation Street, and the Archers. I’ve a feeling the ‘Call the Midwife’ Christmas special was watched by several million people again this year – maybe you were one of them? Or perhaps you preferred ‘Doctor Who’? Or the ‘Great Festive Bake Off’? Or even the ‘Strictly’ grand final, which was shown on Christmas Day evening?

There are certainly plenty of things we might have heard and seen on TV over the past week.

But maybe, if you were asked about what you’d heard and seen this Christmas, you’d think about members of your family – perhaps those you don’t get to see that often. The different generations tend to make different kinds of noises, and indeed tend to look rather different too. It’s certainly lovely to see everyone, even if it sometimes brings challenges as well.

Or maybe you had a chance to go out for one of those lovely long winter walks this Christmas. Perhaps a particular view has left itself imprinted on your mind? Or maybe a particular sound?

What have you heard and seen this Christmas?

And how has it affected you, as you prepare for the start of a new year, and as things get back to normal again in a few days time?

The shepherds in our gospel reading were deeply affected by what they had heard and seen. They glorified and praised God.

I’m not sure what they’d have made of Strictly, or Bake Off, or Doctor Who, or Call the Midwife. In one sense, what they saw was far more down-to-earth and ordinary, but in another sense it was far more amazing and life-changing.

The reading simply tells us that they ‘returned’, presumably to their fields and to their sheep. They went back to where they had previously been, but glorifying and praising God. We don’t know exactly how their lives were changed in the days and weeks and months and years that followed. But, more generally, we do know quite a lot about how hearing and seeing Jesus can change people.

The Book of Acts describes the early church in a wonderfully powerful way, and right near the beginning the same pair of words, ‘heard and seen’, is used to describe a moment when Peter and John were brought before the authorities, and were warned not to speak or
teach any more about Jesus. But Peter and John reply: ‘We cannot keep from speaking about what we have seen and heard.’ (Acts 4.20)

I know Strictly, and Bake Off, and all the other TV Christmas specials are watched by millions of people, some of us included. And they’re great programmes – well, some of them anyway! But if truth be told, it won’t be long and we’ll have forgotten them all.

But for Peter and John, and no doubt for the shepherds too, the impact of what they had seen and heard never left them: ‘We cannot keep from speaking about what we have seen and heard.’

None of us quite know what 2018 will bring, both for us individually and for the world more generally. After the Christmas celebrations we’re about to ‘return’ to our ordinary lives, just as the shepherds returned from the manger.

But the shepherds gave glory and praise to God for all that they had heard and seen, and we must be doing the same. The joy of our faith in Jesus must bubble up from within us, and we too must be people who cannot keep from speaking about what we have seen and heard, whatever we’re returning to.

In fact, I’d encourage you most warmly to think and pray about just one person to whom you could speak about Jesus this week, just as Peter and John did.

‘The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.’

By the grace of God, may we also be those shepherds today and throughout the coming year. Amen.