



SHEPHERDS

Over the years I've collected a number of sayings, including oxymora (figures of speech composed of words that shouldn't go together). I'm not sure how prevalent they are in other languages, but English is full of them.

E.g.:

- Airline food.
- Critical acclaim.
- Anxious patient.
- Political solution.
- Friendly fire.
- Civil strife.
- Sport's personality.
- Comfortable bra.
- Adult male.
- Merry Christmas (it's an oxymoron for some).

What has this to do with Christmas? Well, Jesus too is an oxymoron. He's God and Man. He's Servant and King.

And He's this ...

Luke 2:8-20

In a way, the shepherds here are a privileged bunch. They hear the angels sing, and they're the first to see the Ruler of the entire universe – and announce His arrival!

But why shepherds? Why not someone else? As with the other extras in the Christmas story, these characters highlight something significant about this baby lying in a manger. The shepherds remind us of 2 things:

1) He's The Shepherd Of Israel. Luke 2:8 says, "And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby ..."

By the time of Jesus, shepherding had become something of a despised profession. Shepherds couldn't observe the Sabbath, because they needed to watch their sheep 24/7; they were cut off from the rest of society, so they weren't exactly 'movers and shakers'; and as is often the case with outsiders, they were treated with suspicion. As we'll see, shepherds performed a task that was vital to the spiritual well-being of God's people, and yet they were despised and rejected for it (sound familiar?).

But it hadn't always been like this. In fact, some of the greatest heroes of the OT had started out as shepherds:

- Abraham was a shepherd.
- Moses was a shepherd.
- David was a shepherd.

But most importantly: there are stacks of places in the OT where God Himself is compared to a shepherd, e.g. Psalm 23:1; 28:9; and this one, Psalm 80:1:

*Hear us, O Shepherd of Israel,
You who lead Joseph like a flock;
You who sit enthroned between the kh'ruvim,
shine forth ...*

Which helps us grasp the significance of Jesus' words in John 10:11: "I am the Good Shepherd." He's more than an Abraham or a Moses or a David. He's God Himself.

But that's not all. As I said earlier, Jesus is a bit of an oxymoron. Because not only is He the Shepherd of Israel ...

2) He's The Lamb Of God. Look at the rest of vs8: "And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, watching over their flocks by night."

Nothing surprising there, you might think. But according to the *Mishnah*, the flocks of Bethlehem were no ordinary flocks. These were the flocks used for sacrifice in the Temple in Jerusalem – the daily sacrifices, and the sacrifices offered at Passover. So these flocks were important, because you couldn't be a part of God's people without them. And it was the job of the shepherds of Bethlehem to watch over those flocks and make sure that every single lamb had arrived safely into the world – hence the angel's words: "To *you* has been born ..."

Every sacrificial lamb had to be born in Bethlehem, and every sacrificial lamb had to die in Jerusalem.

In the same way, Jesus had to be born in Bethlehem, and Jesus had to die in Jerusalem.

I.e. Those lambs were a picture of a greater sacrificial lamb to come – one who would die for the sins of the whole world. It's also what the prophet Isaiah had in mind several centuries before Jesus was born (Isaiah 53:7):

*He was oppressed and afflicted,
yet He did not open His mouth;
He was led like a lamb to the slaughter,
and as a sheep before her shearers is silent,
so He did not open His mouth.*

That's why, when John the Baptist spotted Jesus 30 years later, he said, "Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!" (John 1:29). He'd come to die for us.

The Ultimate Shepherd

So the shepherds of Bethlehem remind us that Jesus is a shepherd. But they also remind us that this shepherd became a lamb, became one of us, to lay down His life for us. And just in case you think I'm reading into this, or 'mixing my metaphors', understand that at least one biblical writer got there ahead of me (Revelation 7:17):

*For the Lamb at the centre of the throne
will be their shepherd;
He will lead them to springs of living water;
And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.*

Why do we need a shepherd? Well, I can only really speak for myself, so here goes: because I would be lost without one. I need someone to rescue me; I need someone to watch out for me; I need someone to keep me from doing something stupid! I need someone to lead me, and it has to be someone who's worth it.

And no-one else is.

But why do I need a shepherd who became a lamb? Because I'm a sinner. I can't save myself; I can't make up for all the mistakes I've made over the years (I can't even count them all!); so I'm certainly not in a position to make up for yours, too. It would take someone perfect to do all of that, and I don't measure up. And neither do you.

But Jesus does.

So have you accepted the sacrifice Jesus made for you? Is Jesus your Lamb? And have you handed your life over to Him? Is Jesus your Shepherd?

We need a Jesus who is *both*.