

**Educating Mary**  
**Christmas Midnight**  
**Luke 2: 1-20**

If a survey was done of the most popular theme in stained glass windows in New Zealand churches my hunch is that the clear winner would be Christ the good shepherd. The tone of these pictures is warm, gentle, and pastoral. It is a reflection I guess of our past image of ourselves from an earlier time of a nation of farming folk making our living in the world economy from sheep.

Even when we were a nation with millions of sheep on our hills and pasture lands there wouldn't have been many specialists in their outside care usually known as Shepherds. Their reputation in our culture is perhaps romanticised because of that famous sheep stealer James Mackenzie, whose name was adopted by a portion of our southern lands, and by early television programmes that showed the skills of those who could get sheep dogs to do amazing things by the right whistle signals.

The status of Shepherds in Luke's telling of the Christmas story is a very contested issue in New Testament scholarship. They used to be seen as outsiders, the lowest of the low, shunned by respectable society and the righteous religious because their occupation prevented them from keeping the Jewish law. In this way of considering what happened in the countryside close by, the Shepherds are the first to receive the angelic message because they are a pointer to the fact that the later ministry of Jesus will have a special focus on the outcast, the marginalised, and the rejected. So there is a match up between the humble origins of Jesus and the low status of his first visitors. But lately a higher estimation of the Shepherds has emerged. Not only were they crucial to the peasant farming economy of their day, but also a patient reading of the Hebrew Scriptures reveals that their occupation comes up again and again as a favoured image of God's representatives in action. The prophets talk about certain favoured individuals taking on a God given role to lead, guide, and protect the people – to do what God does as the Shepherd of his people. But the most powerful way this image clusters around central characters in the Old Testament relates to the great hero of Jewish history BC – King David.

David was the Shepherd King of Israel. That was his occupation before he was called to greater things. And let's remember that the bridge incident that gets him in the frame as the leader of Israel's armies is the killing of Goliath, which he accomplishes in single combat using the preferred weapon of Shepherd's – the slingshot. And we can forget about those sentimental images of Jesus meek and mild in the Good Shepherd windows of New Zealand churches. Just as David protected his flock from animal predators in his first vocation

he became famed and loved by his people in his royal role for his skill in war, his success in battle, and his reputation as a lucky commander. To be Shepherd King of Israel was to be the vanquisher of Israel's enemies.

Of course the Shepherd King role had other dimensions. People brought intractable human dilemmas to the King looking for wise judgement and tough minded but fair decisions, in the same way that we go the law courts to get a last resort resolution. The King was the source of justice, and as such had the power of life and death over his subjects who entered in to judgement with him.

Shepherding also involved shrewd political judgement in holding the nation together, choosing the right people as subordinate leaders, and being ruthlessly ready to get rid of those who didn't measure up. You might like to remember David's deathbed speech to his son Solomon about who to bump off after his coronation.

David performed all these roles very well. The problem was that few if any of his successors came anywhere near to doing as well. And this became the central problem of Jewish politics, Jewish history and Jewish religion. Massive and deepening disillusion with political and religious leadership over the generations was matched by a growing hunger for some God-given deliverer to step in unexpectedly and do what David did. As crisis and catastrophe followed on one from another people longed for an almost legendary and mythological Shepherd King. The King Arthur legend had nothing on this pattern of expectation.

Jesus arrived in our world against this backdrop of expectation. Luke arranges the birth narrative to key in the details with the David Shepherd King motifs. Mary and Joseph are obliged by the census to travel 85 miles from Nazareth to Bethlehem, David's place of origin. Jerusalem, the city that David made his capital, is just 5 miles away. We are told that Joseph was "of David's house and line."

When the angel Gabriel at the annunciation told Mary to name her Son Jesus a promise was given – "The Lord God will give him the throne of his ancestor David; he will rule over the House of Jacob for ever and his reign will have no end." While Gabriel persuaded Mary to co-operate fully in God's amazing project she was left with many unanswered questions. Now in the birth scene God communicates the meaning of this event in unmistakable terms.

Instead of the angel communicating directly with Mary and Joseph, he instead presents himself to the Shepherds, who immediately come in from the countryside to deliver the message. In the Bible the prime function of angels is to be God's messengers, but here the task has been delegated to the Shepherds. For apart from anything they say

they are themselves the message. Mary can no longer be in any doubt that her son is to be the longed for Shepherd King of Israel, and apparently much more.

The birth scene is introduced by reference to Caesar Augustus, the bringer of the golden age of peace. Immediately a compare and contrast exercise is set up with a different sort of golden age of peace on offer in this extraordinary event, which Caesar unwittingly helped to set in motion. As one wise commentator puts it, "Peace here has the full Old Testament sense, and beyond the absence of war or some merely inner disposition evokes a whole social order of well-being and prosperity, security and harmony."

God, then, in this scene is educating Mary, is driving home his message to her in a pretty blunt, unmistakeable manner. Is there some matter about which God may be wishing to communicate with you tonight, and in which he may be using similarly blunt instrument methods to get his wishes across? Are you open to receiving the message, to putting the clues together in a coherent pattern of meaning? Are you prepared to act on the message, and to so do something about it, so as to make it happen in your life? Are you open to being educated by God, just as Mary was?