*Christmas 1B Luke 2: 15-21*

**May I speak in the name of God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen**

Hearing and seeing.

You know the propensity that coffee shops have these days for writing your name on the cup? Number three son, Calum, bought a coffee while he was Christmas shopping, and the barista completely misheard when he told her his name, so his coffee came out with Alan printed firmly and clearly on the cup. What was heard and what was seen were two entirely different things from the reality….

Today’s readings speak of hearing and seeing; and of our ability to notice God in our midst. God is abundant and apparent in his world, and offers us hints of his presence everywhere, but do we always use our senses to notice? Going by the awesome number of people who came to Christmas services this year, we don’t have any problem noticing God at Christmas. And if we can notice God in the babe of Bethlehem, then perhaps we can at least learn to notice God in all things, and all things in God.

We stay with this amazing story of the birth of God in human form for another week, and notice his effect on ordinary people (which we know from our reading of scripture continued throughout his life….)

We’ve just heard in the gospel that ‘the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.’ Familiar words. Perhaps so familiar that we don’t really notice them. We hear but don’t really see them.

So then, what have you heard and seen this Christmas? I have to confess I haven’t seen as much on television as I might like. I usually look forward to sitting down and watching a whole film, which we rarely do at other times of the year, but it was Friday before I actually did it – and then it was a James Bond, and I can never fully follow the plots. My bad, doubtless………

But apart from television – and arguably far more important – is the seeing and spending time with friends and family. It might be challenging, that – last year, for the first time ever, we mixed the two sides of the family up a bit by inviting my newly widowed mother in law to join the Sherrington clan for the Christmas festivities. She said she had a good time, but she didn’t come again this year……….

The Sherrington clan – I should tell you - tends to be loud – with ten grandchildren ranging in age from 12 to 32, that is sort of inevitable – so we see them all together, but we don’t always hear what each of them is saying!

And the other thing I didn’t manage to do – yet – was go for a long chilly walk, now that I can – the sort where the nicest bit is getting home and thawing out, with tired dogs flopping all over the floor. Maybe tomorrow will be my time to do that. Seeing bare winter trees blowing, or hearing the sound of leaves being scuffed by boots, and the panting of the dogs are all testaments to the healthiness of the activity and the smugness we can feel afterwards…

So that was me, but 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. We are told that they glorified and praised God. I’m not sure what they’d have made of Strictly, or Bake Off, or Christmas dinner, or the concept of walking pet dogs; in one sense, what they saw was far more down-to-earth and ordinary, yet in many ways it was far more amazing and life-changing than any of those.

One of the wonders of our God, the thing that we celebrate at Christmas time, is that the Creator of the Whole Universe comes to live among us here on this little planet Earth. I nearly said our little planet Earth, but of course it isn’t ours at all, but God’s…. And what’s more, he is born a human baby with only an animals’ feeding trough for a cradle. The ultimate paradox of our faith: God becoming human.

We heard that the angels appeared to the shepherds and told them to go to Bethlehem to see the Saviour, who is the Messiah, the Lord. The shepherds didn’t wait. They didn’t doubt what they had seen and heard, didn’t discount it as nonsense and keep it quiet in case anyone thought they were bonkers, but went straight away to Bethlehem and found the baby.

And that meeting with the infant Jesus had such a profound effect on them that then they couldn’t keep it to themselves but had to spread it round the whole town.

And most remarkably for me is that it wasn’t the encounter with the angels that set the shepherds talking to everyone they met, but the encounter with the baby. You might have expected that a visit by angels would have filled the shepherds with such awe and wonder that they couldn’t help worshipping God.

And you might easily see a baby every day, yet it was actually the baby that set the shepherds alight in praising God. So even at that time, when Jesus was newborn and completely helpless and just like every other newborn baby, even before he knew how to smile – there was still something so special about him that it made the shepherds spread the word about him and return to their homes and jobs glorifying and praising God.

The Book of Acts describes the early church in a wonderful and 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’s response is: We cannot keep from speaking about what we have seen and heard.

All the Christmas television stuff – and even stuff talked about with our families and friends – we’ve probably already forgotten on the whole. Fun at the time, but not generally the stuff by which lives are changed forever. 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 knows what 2018 will bring, either for us individually and for the world in general. After the Christmas celebrations we’re about to ‘return’ to our ordinary lives having visited Jesus, just as the shepherds did. 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 wonder of what we have seen and heard has to take root within us so that we too become people who cannot help ourselves when it comes to speaking about that experience, regardless of what we are returning to.

Perhaps this coming week, at the very start of the New Year, we can each think and pray about just one person we could tell about Jesus this week. Not in any weird or contrived or over-evangelistic way, but just as Peter and John did – because we can’t help being touched by our own re-experience of the first Christmas.

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 too be those shepherds today and through the coming year.

**Amen**