**FOR FURTHER REFLECTION**

Angels & Shepherds

*The Gospel of Luke* has been called “the most beautiful book ever written”. To be sure, it features some of most eloquent and timeless Christian poetry, such as Mary’s song of joy, known as *The Magnificat* (“Tell out my soul, the greatness of the Lord,” *Luke*, Chapter 1, verses 46-55) and Zechariah’s song of praise (“Blessed be the Lord, the God of Israel, who has come to His people and set them free,” *Luke*, Chapter 1, verses 67-80), which have anchored Christian worship for centuries.

It is also one of the most brilliant writings of the classical world. Luke was Greek, a highly educated and cultured man, a physician by profession, and was the first real historian to write about Jesus. Luke had the opportunity to stand back, reflectively, from the extraordinary events that had taken place, to talk to and interview the people involved – including Jesus’ mother, Mary. Thereby, Luke was able to offer his own quite full account for those eager to learn more about Jesus.

Luke’s Gospel stands out amongst the Gospels in various ways. It is the longest and most detailed of the four Gospels. No retelling of the Christmas story would be complete without angels and shepherds, and we have the *Gospel of Luke* to thank for them. *Luke* is the only Gospel to record this magnificent encounter of the angels and the shepherds, a moment of heaven touching earth.

This idea of heaven touching earth, of the Divine in relationship with the human, or ‘angels rubbing shoulders with shepherds,’ is a key theme and aspect of Luke’s Gospel – and Luke’s understanding of God in Christ – the divine heart full of compassion and love for humanity. Luke’s Gospel reveals Jesus to be the epicentre of hospitality – there are more meals in *Luke* than anywhere else in the Bible! Food, fellowship and faith are paramount to *Luke*, and it is a table open to all – angels and shepherds, alike.

*Luke* is also the only Gospel to reveal anything about Jesus’ childhood, describing the family’s visit to Jerusalem when Jesus was 12 years old. Significantly, Luke is the only Gospel writer to provide a sequel! In *The Book of Acts*, Luke continues the story beyond the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, to the birth and growth of the early church. In this way, the *Gospel of Luke* continues and is ongoing -- including us.

So much of our understanding of Jesus, our praise, our worship, our celebrations of Christmas, *&etc.* are grounded in *The Gospel of Luke* – not least for his recalling of the encounter between the angels and the shepherds.

* Today’s music selection: “O magne pater (Antiphon, fol. 466) by Hildegard von Bingen, performed by Sequentia, Barbara Thornton & Benjamin Bagby, from the album - *Hildegard von Bingen: Saints ©* 1998 Sony Music Entertainment