



Station Four – God’s message for the shepherds

It’s funny, they all came so noisy to the door, then they stopped. I could hear a whispering and shuffling, someone knocked, so gentle I hardly heard it. I didn’t say anything, then the door slowly crept open, and they pushed him in, the young one. He stood there, framed against the starlight and peered in. There was only the one little lamp, glowing golden on a ledge. The opened door made a draught, and the shadows danced and shifted. He jerked forward, propelled by someone’s big hand I think and as he stood there the other heads peered round him. It was quite comical to see them, but I didn’t laugh, they were so shy. The litter rustled as they filled up the doorway and started to creep forward. I wasn’t the only one awake now, he was mazed with sleep, but ready to leap up and protect us, he was so sweet to me. I just smiled, to show they were welcome, and they slowly came forward. Nobody said a word. You could see their heads turning this way and that, eyes trying to make sense of this strange scene.

Some of the creatures stirred, disturbed by this intrusion. This made one of them jump, then he went red, ashamed to show fear in front of his work mates. He swaggered a bit, just to show he wasn’t afraid, but nobody took any notice at all. We were surrounded by now, some on their knees, others peering over shoulders, and the young one mouth open, just gawping. It was kindly done, he just seemed totally amazed; anyone would think he’d never seen a woman before, let alone a baby. There was a sort of gasp from all of them, then the oldest, the one who reminded me so much of grandfather, he simply asked if we believed in angels. My man and I smiled back our answer, we knew, we all knew. We had something in common.

Wordlessly I held out my bundle, with real reverence one of them held him, cradled him. I saw the face light up as a smile rewarded his attention. A tiny fist opened and fingers grasped at a hairy face. Tears flowed as I lay back and saw my child, my eldest, being passed from hand to hand, some awkward, some practised, but here was nobility and gentleness and passion and peacefulness and joy a whole mix of emotions.

It may seem strange to say it, but once I let go I didn’t feel quite so lonely. I know I was all emotional and tired and all that, but when I shared him with those, those men, I felt better. It was almost as if he was accepted, he wasn’t just my, our, responsibility; these ordinary people just welcomed him. They made a strange picture, coarse clothes, dirty faces, straggling hair, untidy beards, all with a slightly soppy expression on their face. It was like having our own set of uncles and brothers and cousins, ready to protect him; looking out for him. For that night we were family, drawn together. It seemed just natural for them to settle down in the corner, some to watch, some to sleep, and the young one, simply to dream. Perhaps he wasn’t dreaming after all, it is possible that he was reliving the experience, sorting out memories, fixing images. I know I did much the same with my cousin’s song; I went over that in mind, over and over again, clothing the words with detail, creating images to store up against the dark days. And even then I knew there would be dark days.



Station Four – God’s message for the shepherds

I suppose every mother fears for her child, especially the oldest, it’s all so new, an uncharted area. Each cry, each cough, each stirring in the sleep. One of the reasons I never really slept was I was listening, making sure that one breath followed another. How I wanted to protect him, keep him from harm. There was comfort in the sleeping noises of those men, comfort in the watchfulness of the youth.

As dawn broke the magic and the mystery seemed to evaporate, we were still close, friendly, but not as close. Maybe it was the dark, perhaps it was that shared experience, it had been tangible. Before they left we shared a meal. Simple enough, some goats’ cheese, fresh water from the well, loaves of fresh bread cooked outside by the old man; he must have had flour tucked away somewhere. Nobody else was about, the streets were indeed silent, there was that early morning peacefulness.

It was only as they left that anyone spoke, good wishes, words of encouragement for both of us; one spoke a blessing. The old man told us that he indeed was a grandfather, twin boys, just six weeks old, the pride of his life, at last children to carry on his family line. A couple of others volunteered that they were fathers, all seemed so proud that we had something in common. It seemed that they saw us as special, very special, nobility or something like that; perhaps that’s why they had been so quiet with us. They certainly weren’t that quiet after they left us, I reckon they must have told everybody they met. I know that some took the opportunity to go home and see their family, a couple of wives shyly came to see us; some brought little gifts, blankets, baby clothes, food. We had a constant stream of visitors for the next few days, some were just curious, others obviously wanted to help in some way. I felt very welcome. I guess all sorts of stories went around about us. The more superstitious regarded me as some kind of wonder person, they would just come up and touch me, or ask to hold the babe. He was wonderful, loved every minute of it, even as a baby he just seemed to love people; I know it’s easy to be wise after the event, but he did affect people. Nothing very dramatic, not like those foolish stories spread around, no he just made people peaceful, but then most folk get quite broody holding a baby. I’ve seen grown men with tears in their eyes coping with a teething child, and the awe when a child just sleeps in your arms.