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'In that region there were shepherds keeping watch over their flock'

But as the Israelites settled in towns and cities and turned to farming, attitudes towards the shepherds



In the Old Testament shepherds were greatly valued and treated with respect. Patriarchs, prophets and kings had all tended sheep. Job, a rich man, owned 14,000 sheep. David was tending sheep when he was called by God and anointed by Samuel.

changed. As the New Testament opens, shepherding had become a dirty, lonely life, away from civilisation. Shepherds could not observe the daily rituals of their faith, and so they had a low status in society, looked down upon by orthodox Jews.

But out in the countryside with just the hills and the plains and the open air, St Luke tells us that it was there that God's message was proclaimed and heard. Cities and towns had walls and barriers, as Bethlehem has today. But in the fields at night, there were shepherds, watching and alert, ready for any eventuality. And so, they were the first to hear of the birth of a Saviour.

'The Annunciation to the Shepherds' is this month's painting by Sano di Pietro. We know little about this Italian artist apart from some dates. He was born in Siena in 1406 and died there in 1481. But he has left us a legacy of beautiful and sensitive paintings. As we look at this scene, we see

the human details: two shepherds huddled by the fireside with their dog, all three looking up to see the angel, and a spear by the side to ward off thieves and predators. The sheep are safely in their pen, black and white fleeces huddled together for warmth. In the sky the angel appears, bearing an olive branch in one hand and with the other pointing to Bethlehem in the distance.

Luke has already told us of another annunciation, with Gabriel visiting Mary. Artists loved to portray this scene and often showed a lily, the symbol of purity, in their paintings. Here there is the olive sprig, a symbol of peace to reinforce the angelic message of peace in the birth of the

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## And Finally

**ACROSS:** 1, Tabernacle. 7, Absalom. 8, Incas. 10, Roes. 11, Captured. 13, Fright. 15, Cavell. 17, Cyclonic. 18, Herb. 21, Sonar. 22, Amazing. 23, Settlement.

**DOWN:** 1, Taste. 2, Bold. 3, Ramiah. 4, Abiathar. 5, Lucerne. 6, Sacrifices. 9, Saddlebags. 12, Theocrat. 14, Incense. 16, Pilate. 19, Exist. 20, Save.

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### *Continued*

Saviour. Luke goes on to tell us how Jesus brought new meaning and peace to all those like the shepherds who were nobody in the eyes of people, but everything to the eyes and heart of God.

Jesus in His teaching often turned to the theme of sheep and shepherds, with parables

about lost sheep, gates to the fold, and hiring shepherds. Just as the faithful shepherds were prepared to give their lives to protect the flock, so Jesus the Good Shepherd gave His life for the world – a death that would bring the peace and reconciliation shown in that olive branch held by the angel. At this Christmas time we rejoice with the heavenly host to proclaim the birth of this Prince of Peace and we commit ourselves to that work of peace and shepherding.

