

In the air

While Shepherds Watched

Ariel Wagner-Parker

Scene: a field somewhere near Bethlehem.

Nighttime.

An extremely bright star shines in the East.

Two shepherds, Xak and Yak, are playing dice by the light of a small fire. A third shepherd, Zak, is gazing into space. A sheep lies stretched out with its head on its paws. There is a sudden explosion of light. The Angel of the Lord comes down. Glory shines around.

Xak and Yak start to their feet.

„Holy Moses!“ cries Xak, „what the hell's going on?“

„Blimey!“ cries Yak, grabbing a bit of firewood. „Who are you? What do you want?“

„I am the Angel of the Lord!“ saith the Angel of the Lord.

Zak looks at him. „Oh so you are. Come on, you two, it's only an angel. Haven't you ever seen an angel before?“

The sheep bleats vaguely, yawns and goes back to sleep.

The Angel of the Lord looks non-plussed. „I'm not just any old angel. I am... (he strikes an attitude)... The Angel of the Lord!“

„What lord?“ says Xak, suspiciously. „There are hundreds of lords. Everyone's a bloody lord these days. Except shepherds of course. We're just proles, the huddled poor.“

„The Lord God, of course,“ says the Angel of the Lord, stiffly, „and you're meant to be Sore Afraid. Then I say unto

you: Fear not: for, behold, I bring you Good Tidings of Great Joy, which shall be unto all people.“

„Which shall be what unto all people?“ says Zak. „You can't just say: which shall be unto all people. It's bad grammar. You have to say what it shall be unto all people.“

„What's tidings?“ says Yak, „and if they're for all people, why's it us that's getting them?“

„Tidings is news,“ says Zak. „He means he's got good news for us.“

„Look why don't you all just shut up for a minute,“ says the Angel of the Lord. „Good Tidings of Great Joy I bring. For Unto You...“

„Oh that's very bloody likely, I must say,“ says Xak. „When does anything good ever happen to us? Trouble, that's what happens to us. Take this new tax business. This bloke comes and says we've got to go all the way to the bloody City, just for the privilege of getting taxed, so Caesar can get his hands on our money. If we had any, which we haven't.“

„... And if it's not tax then it's some mumbo-jumbo new rules they come up with about how we're feeding our sheep all wrong,“ says Yak. „If we had any, which we haven't.“

„... Or that bloody star up there that's as bright as the moon and makes the wolves howl.“

A wolf howls. The Angel of the Lord closes his eyes. His left wing itches.

„Now listen, you three. You have been singled out to hear the Good Tidings. You're destined to be the most famous shepherds in the history of... of... shepherds. They'll write about you in the Gospels – well,

Luke will anyway – and there'll be hymns about you: *While shepherds watched their flocks by night, or washed their socks*, as the children will say. And you'll be in great gold-framed oil paintings in museums all over the world, with your flocks...“

„What's all this about flocks?“ says Yak. „Do you see any flocks? I don't see any flocks. Murdered because of foot and mouth or gobbled up by wolves, every last one. The only sheep we've got left is Dolly here. She's a bit fat but she can hardly be called a flock.“

„Did you say Dolly?“ says the Angel of the Lord, brightening. „Well that's

more Good Tidings then! For Dolly shall be the ancestress of the first cloned lamb, the most famous sheep in the history of... of... sheep.“

„What's cloned mean?“ says Yak.

„Copied,“ says Zak. „But sorry, old man, you've got the wrong Dolly. Ours never had a baby in her life and she's past it now. No ovine descendants for old Dolls, I'm afraid.“

„Ah. Oh well. But actually babies is what I've come about,“ says the Angel of the Lord. „That's the Good Tidings. For Unto You a Child is Born...“

„A child? Not unto me, mate,“ says Xak, „that I can promise you. My wife's too old. Like Dolly.“

„Unto me?“ says Yak, „you mean my wife's had a baby? But I haven't seen her for months. Why the... I'll bloody kill her, that's what I'll do! Who's the father?“

„Well, not unto me anyway“, says Zak. „Of that you can be quite sure.“

„No, no,“ says the Angel of the Lord, wearily, „you don't understand. A Child has been born unto the Virgin Mary and he's the Son of the Lord.“

„What lord?“ says Xak, „there are thousands of them. Anyway, come on. If this Mary's having a baby, how can she be a bloody virgin? I mean you must think we're really stupid.“

„And what's all this got to do with us?“ says Yak.

„Well,“ says the Angel of the Lord, „ye have to go to Bethlehem where ye shall find the Babe wrapped in Swaddling Clothes, with Mary and Joseph, lying in a Manger...“

„Oh,“ says Xak, „so now we're to go to Bethlehem to see some lord's baby. Come off it! I mean no lord's going to put on his guest list three shepherds he's never clapped eyes on, is he? Nah. Know what I think? I think you're from the tax people like that other bloke and you're just trying to get us to go and be taxed!“

„Yeah,“ says Yak, „that's right. It's a trick.“

„Look, you two,“ says Zak, „I know it's a bore, but why don't we just go to Bethlehem and get it over with. Maybe then they'll leave us in peace.“

„... And Three Kings will come, bringing gifts of Gold, Frankincense and Myrrh...“

„Oh all right then,“ says Xak. „Anything for a quiet life. Come on, Dolly, stir your stumps, old girl. We're going to the City.“

„What's myrrh?“ says Yak.

„Meeeeeh,“ says Dolly.

„By the way,“ says Zak, over his shoulder, „how many of you lot can dance on the head of a pin?“

The Angel of the Lord closes his eyes. The itch has moved to his right wing.



Ghirlandaio Domenico (1449-1494): „Adoration of the Shepherds“, aka: „Xak, Yak, Zak and Dolly“