

THE EMMAUS SERIES

Solemnity of Mary, Mother of God, January 1 (ABC)

Numbers 6:22-27

Galatians 4:4-7

Luke 2:16-21

Mary treasured all these things and pondered them in her heart

Today's liturgy invites us to reflect upon Mary's place in the beginnings of our salvation. Although she played a central part, hers is an unobtrusive presence. Her centrality is so subtly described in the New Testament that in the controversies of the past, Protestants claimed that Catholic tradition's veneration of Mary had not basis in the Scriptures. Today's scholarship makes it clear that Mary's unselfish commitment from the beginning to all that her Son stood for made her a model of discipleship for all Christians.

Today's gospel presents another of the remarkable scenes created by the genius of Luke. In this tableau, he emphasises the unassuming greatness of Mary by setting up a contrast, in the story of the Saviour's birth, between the boisterous shepherd messengers and the contemplative silence of the young mother of Jesus. Luke has a special interest, as we know, in 'the poor', the 'anawim', whose trust in God kept alive the true faith of God's people - though they were looked down upon by those who prided themselves in their ritual observances, because in their struggle to survive they did not have the time or the resources to take part in these many observances. The shepherds are representatives of this group - sometimes disreputable, unwashed strugglers who were the very opposite of the Pharisees with their ritual purity. Luke presents this group as the first human bearers of the Gospel in his narrative; and as the story of Jesus unfolds, he will preach the Good News of the Kingdom to simple folk like this, with all their shortcomings.

Very skilfully, Luke sets up a contrast between the bustle and chatter of the shepherds, as they burst in upon the nativity scene, and the contemplative silence of Mary, who 'treasured all these things and pondered them in her heart'. The role of the shepherds - as it is described by Luke - anticipates great themes of the Gospel Mary's child is to bring to the world. Like God's messengers in the past, their commission is given in a meeting with 'the glory of the Lord' - the incomparable greatness of God, encountered as a source of blessings. They are made bearers of the good news of God - 'news of great joy to be shared by all the people' - 'in the town of David' is born 'Christ the Lord'. This is an astounding declaration: the messiah has finally come; and he is declared to be 'the Lord' himself - a title that for Old Testament faith belonged exclusively to God. They are given 'a sign'; in a manger - a feeding trough - they will find the one who is to call himself 'the bread come from heaven', as nourishment for the whole world. And finally, the message the shepherds announce is one of 'peace for all who enjoy God's favour' - it is God's 'grace' that will bring a final wholeness to the human family, because the Saviour will make himself 'our peace' (Eph 2:14)

The point of the contrast between the chattering shepherds, and the young mother who treasures all that she hears is now clear. It was impossible for the unlettered messengers to understand the full implications of their astounding announcement. Mary, on the other hand, was beginning the journey that - during her earthly life - would lead her into the fullness of faith in all that was being proclaimed. Through this journey, she is given to us all as the model of discipleship, as the Mother of the family of the Lord's disciples.

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