

Christmas 1

You have to feel for Hannah and Mary. Hannah was so desperate to have a child that when she finally did, she gave Samuel up to the Temple and could only see him once a year, when she would give him a new linen garment she had made as he grew out of the old one. And in our Gospel reading, Mary loses Jesus for three days. Luckily most of us don't know what that would be like, even if we could imagine the heartache and soul searching involved, although I suspect we might never grasp the extent of Mary's relief on finding Jesus.

In yesterday's Gospel reading, after the shepherds visited, Mary, Joseph and the newly-born Jesus, Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart. Today, after losing an adolescent Jesus for three days and not understanding Jesus' apparent rejection of Joseph as his Father, followed by a period of obedience to his earthly parents, she again treasured all these things in her heart.

I wonder what Luke is trying to tell us. One thing, at least, is clear. He is drawing a very clear parallel between Jesus and Samuel. The last verse of our Old Testament reading is Now the boy Samuel continued to grow both in stature and in favour with the Lord and with the people. And Luke writes And Jesus grew in wisdom and stature, and in favour with God and man.

Jesus, Luke says, is the new Samuel, only more so. More than the faithful priest that Samuel is, Jesus is God's anointed one.

What else is Luke trying to tell us?

That Mary was the first contemplative? Probably not, as some of the prophets will have beaten her to it.

More likely is that Luke is setting her up as an example to us and for us. She thinks about things, especially those things she doesn't really understand. She pays attention.

How much do we wonder, or treasure or ponder the things of God, especially those things that are beyond our understanding? Mary is inviting us to do just that, not necessarily to get clear answers but more to find space to try and work out what God is doing in our lives.

And that's not easy, and nor should it be. Understanding what God is up to was never meant to be easy. Which is why, like Mary we need to reflect.

And that's hard, because our culture has become a culture where rushing without stopping to think has become the norm. People jump to conclusions from a place of prejudice, and it is so destructive.

It's so sad to see universities become the very opposite of what they should be, places where people learn to think. Instead, there's a rush to stop anybody who might cause offence. Yet, how often do you also hear that when both sides have the opportunity to speak face to face and one-to-one the ogre in their mind turns out not to exist in reality.

The other thing that Luke may be pointing us to is Jesus' very humanity. After all, this is the only story in any of the Gospels about an adolescent Jesus, the only story about Jesus between his birth and the start of his public ministry. What does he tell us? That like any other child of that age Jesus starts asserting his independence without thinking through the consequences. Remind you of anyone?

The gaps in the Gospels of course allow us to exercise our imaginations, what sort of education did he have, how much older than his brothers and sisters was he? Had the divine overtaken the human at this stage?

Again, it should make us think. How much do we understand about the Incarnation? Who do we believe God to be and what do we think really matters about God's involvement in our lives?

What matters most to us, Jesus being born at all, his death on the cross or his resurrection, his ascension, his heart for justice. Each of us may have a different answer and that's fine. What matters is that like Mary we take time to treasure these things in our heart and ponder them