

Focus on the Person of Jesus ...

... Just like Mary

A sermon given on the First Sunday of Christmas, 31st December 2023 by the Vicar, the Revd Canon Jonathan Baker, in Beverley Minster

Luke 2:15-21

"Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart."

So, as we emerge from the first wave of our main Christmas celebrations, it's worth reflecting on an important aspect of Christian experience, and I'm talking here about the gap that can exist between promise and experience.

We tend to take it for granted that once Mary had embraced the message of the Archangel Gabriel and had said, "I am the servant of the Lord, let it be for me according to your word" it was all plain sailing. We tend to assume that having accepted her calling at the beginning to be the mother of the Son of God, Mary had no more questions or doubts. But I think that's unlikely - think about the gap between promise and experience in Mary's life: she has been told by a divine messenger that her son will be unlike any other; that he will be great; will be called son of the most high; that he will be a king like his ancestor David, the greatest of the kings of Israel; but that unlike David, his kingdom will last forever; she has been told that this son will be conceived through the direct agency of the Holy Spirit - and that bit certainly matched Mary's experience, because she fell pregnant without any man being involved. So the promises are all very exalted and awe inspiring.

But what had actually happened?

Mary had found herself pregnant without a husband and therefore probably subject to all sorts of unwelcome gossip; she was forced to travel for miles over rough hill country at the whim of the roman overlords whilst nine months pregnant; she had to endure the frightening experience of giving birth to her first child alone, away from her family, with no midwife, in a stable alongside farm animals; and yet this child was meant to be the Son of God, the next king David. The gap between promise and experience was huge.

And despite the mystery surrounding the baby's conception, the way events played out cannot have matched Mary's expectations. The only thing that was a bit strange was this visit by a rough bunch of shepherds with stories of having been told by angels that the baby in the manger was the new-born Messiah. So Mary's experience didn't fit what anyone would have expected for the mother of a great king, let alone the Son of God. She must have been full of doubts and questions about whether it could really be true, about whether her baby Jesus really was so special.

And yet there had been these signs that there was more to this than met the eye. Not only was there her own experience of Gabriel there was also the testimony of the shepherds and, of course, the mystery of the child's conception. So there were hints that there was something odd going on, but they probably weren't strong enough or clear enough to put all her doubts to rest. No wonder she *"treasured what the shepherds told her and pondered them in her heart."*

Our experience isn't quite the same as Mary's, obviously, but I wonder whether you too, sometimes struggle with the gap in your life between promise and experience. We too, are holding on to and celebrating the promise that the child born at Christmas is no ordinary child, that this Jesus is also Emmanuel - 'God With Us' - the incarnate Lord; the word made flesh. We too, tell each other to trust by faith that in Jesus, God has visited his people, that the creator of the entire universe has entered his world and brought heaven down to earth - not just 'down to earth', but into a manger in a stable. And when we gaze at this tiny, wriggling infant, we are told to believe that we are gazing into the heart and soul of the universe itself.

And we look around us - but what we actually see is terrible cruelty; and slaughter; in Gaza and Ukraine; we see cruel people trafficking women and abusing children; we see our very planet consumed by greed and indifference, while people argue about who needs to change the most. And we look into our own lives: sometimes we see loneliness or illness; we see broken promises and disillusionment; and we feel the gap between the promise of Christmas and the reality of the world as we find it today.

And yet, there are little hints that keep us going: the sense that the world is more mysterious and wonderful than we can comprehend; the sense that when our lives are touched by moments of grace, moments of beauty or love or forgiveness, there is something very profound and real going on; the sense that the gospel message rings true, the message that we have been made to know and to be known by our creator. In countless ways we are given hints and signs that there is more going on than meets the eye, and that the gap between promise and reality can somehow be bridged in the gift of the babe of Bethlehem and in the work of the Holy Spirit in the world today.

So, as we try to make sense of our own faith in the light of our experience, may I encourage you to focus on the person of Jesus Christ and just like Mary, to *"treasure up these things and ponder them in your hearts."*

Reading Text

Luke 2:15-21

¹⁵ When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, 'Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us.' ¹⁶ So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. ¹⁷ When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; ¹⁸ and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. ¹⁹ But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. ²⁰ The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them. ²¹ After eight days had passed, it was time to circumcise the child; and he was called Jesus, the name given by the angel before he was conceived in the womb.