

Homily – January 1st, 2025 – Mary, Mother of God



This gospel story, from Luke, is the continuation of the story we heard on Christmas Eve. As you recall, on Christmas Eve, we heard how an Angel appeared to the shepherds and told them, ***“I bring you good news of great joy for all the people; to you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, who is the Christ, the Lord.”*** The angel doesn’t force the shepherds to believe this, nor does the angel drag the shepherds to the

manger. Instead, angel invites the shepherds to experience it for themselves. They will not have the revelation handed to them on a silver platter; they will have to work a little bit themselves in order to access the revelation.

Isn’t that so true in our own lives? Anything handed to us quickly becomes easy-come-easy-go, and we tend not to appreciate it. The things we appreciate most are the things we had to work for. The shepherds have to do a little work. What they have to do is follow the clues lay out by the Angel; they have to follow the trail of bread crumbs. The two clues are: 1) you will find a child wrapped in swaddling clothes, and 2) this child will be lying in a food trough for the animals. The shepherds hear the proclamation of the angel, they follows the clues to the

manger, and they are overwhelmed with joy, a joy they just have to share with others. We are told they returned to their homes glorifying and praising God.

That's the pattern of how faith is passed on. First you hear something, then you experience it for yourself, and finally you pass it on. Nine months prior to this wonderful event, Mary lived that pattern in her own life. She heard the Angel Gabriel's message, she experienced it in her womb, and she ran to tell her cousin Elizabeth. Mary went with haste to visit Elizabeth and nine months later the shepherds went with haste to the manger. What you have discovered, through your own experience, is so good it makes you run.

The pattern of Mary and the shepherds, the pattern of hearing, experiencing and telling others, is the pattern I see in people wanting to join the Church. It's rare that someone joins the Church or the R.C.I.A. process simply out of the blue. It's more likely they first heard about this Jesus from someone else, they want to experience Jesus in their own lives more deeply, and if that encounter is good, they want to tell others. Thus, the pattern repeats itself. By telling others, those others become the hearers who may want to experience Jesus more deeply themselves.

Without trying to throw cold water on anyone's excitement around their newly-found faith, I have to give a warning. Often, hearing the good news brings excitement and a desire to share it too quickly without making that faith our own. Mary and the shepherd don't stay at the level of amazement. Before they share their experience, they allow that very experience to deepen within them. That's

why Mary is always mentioned in the same sentence as “pondering.” She ponders the Word made flesh before shares it. Jesus has a little saying about this in Matthew’s gospel when he says, “Don’t throw your pearl to the pigs.” In other words, don’t dispense with something valuable too quickly or give it away to people who are not in a position to appreciate it. I think Jesus appreciated the fact that his mother was a ponderer. I also think he wanted his disciples, and his modern-day disciples, to be ponderers. Many times, after performing a miracle, he would say, “Don’t tell anyone.” Obviously, someone somewhere along the line squealed. When Jesus told his disciples not to tell anyone, he didn’t mean for them to keep it a secret forever. Rather, they were to hold onto the experience—ponder it, you might say—until they drew meaning from that experience. Running off with amazement and excitement runs the risk of turning Jesus message into something superficial. Superficiality never transforms people in any long-term way. It just keeps people looking for one more thing to be amazed with.

A story about the need to ponder.

One day, a young fugitive, trying to hide himself from the enemy, entered a small village. The people were kind to him and offered him a place to stay. But when the soldiers who sought the fugitive asked where he was hiding, everyone became fearful. The soldiers threatened to burn the village and kill every person in it, unless the young man was handed over to them before dawn. The young people went to the minister and asked him what to do. The minister, torn between handing the boy over to the enemy or having his people killed, withdrew to his room and read his Bible hoping to find the answer before dawn. After many hours, in the early morning his eyes fell on these words, “It is better that one man dies than that the whole people be lost.” Then the minister closed his Bible, called the soldiers and told them where the boy was hidden. And after the soldiers led the fugitive away to be killed, there was a feast in the village,

because the minister had saved the lives of the people. But the minister did not celebrate. Overcome with deep sadness, he remained in his room. That night an angel came to him and asked, "What have you done?"

"I handed over the fugitive to the enemy," he said.

"But don't you know you have handed over the Messiah?"

"How could I know?" the minister replied anxiously.

Then the angel said, "If instead of reading your Bible, you had visited this young man just once and looked into his eyes, you would have known."

Maybe that was at the heart of Mary's ponder—looking into Jesus's eyes until the answer deepened in her.

~Fr. Phil