

Our Gospel reading for Sunday takes up where the Gospel reading for Midnight Mass left off. After hearing the incredible news from an angel that the Messiah was born in Bethlehem, the shepherds go to Bethlehem, and find the baby in a manger, just as the angel had told them. As they arrive, they tell all they meet what had been told to them about the child, and Luke tells us that “All who heard it were amazed...” Luke also tells us that “Mary kept all these things, reflecting on them in her heart. Then the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, just as it had been told to them.”

I think that both the response of the shepherds and of Mary have something to tell us as we go through the Christmas season into the New Year. For me, the shepherds can be seen to represent how we feel at this time of year. The holiday is over, but we still have warm feelings about being with family and friends, and the joy of giving to others. We still rejoice in having “God-with-us.”

Mary’s response, I think, is a bit more complex. There are various translations of what the Gospel actually says, but the gist of the words means that Mary kept all the things that she had experienced in her mind and heart, trying to sort out what it all meant. And so, perhaps Mary could be seen to represent how we might reflect on what the implications of Christ’s birth might be for us as we enter the year 2012. I’m not saying that the shepherds did not deal with the implications of Christ’s birth, but we do not hear about them again. We do hear about Mary throughout the Gospels. What did it mean for her to have to flee to Egypt, or to hear that foreboding prophecy from Simeon in the Temple? How did she see the necessity of Jesus leaving home to begin His mission? Could she see God’s plan when she saw her son condemned and tortured and crucified? Perhaps even this early, Mary could sense that Jesus was not going to be the kind of Messiah that most people in Israel wanted or expected. And so, she kept reflecting on all that she had heard and seen throughout Jesus’ life.

Our Gospel reading presents us with (at least) two lines of reflection. One question on which we could reflect is: What are the long-term implications of Christmas joy for us beyond the after-Christmas sales of the holiday, or even the end of the season of the holy day when we celebrate Epiphany? Another question may be: Would we be able to glorify and praise God for all that *we* have seen and heard? For many of us, 2011 was worse than 2010. For others, it was better, but there is no doubt that we have seen turmoil and suffering, if not in our personal lives, then in many places throughout the world.

Perhaps we can let the joy of Christmas sustain us through the times we find hard to understand, as we reflect on Jesus’ birth as the beginning of the fulfillment of God’s promises to His people. Because the Son of God became one of us in Jesus Christ, we can, as St. Paul tells us in our second reading from Galatians, cry out to God, saying, “Abba, Father!” We *are* children of God, and being children we *are* heirs with Christ!

As we ponder the meaning of Christ’s Birth, Life, Passion, Death, and Resurrection for us, may we be willing, like Mary, to bring Christ into the world.

May God bless you and yours throughout the New Year!

In Christ,

Fr. Phil, CP