

Nativity of the Lord Proper 2

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Introduction

Even though conflict is one of the threads woven into the background of the Christmas story – the census was, after all, a registration enabling a controlling foreign power to extract taxes from a subjugated people – it does not tend to be our first thought when reading these well-known texts. Nevertheless Luke's account of the birth of Jesus in the first 20 verses of chapter 2 contains a number of threads which can help to guide us as we negotiate situations of change or conflict. These notes for Proper 1 focus on the first half of the passage and those for Proper 2 on the second half – which each pointing to a different, but nevertheless complementary insight. Whereas the notes for Proper 1 focused on the first half of the passage, these for Proper 2 look at the second half, in particular the different forms of response to the events of the narrative revealed in 18 and 19.

Anchor question

Have you ever set aside time to specifically think through a situation, problem or dilemma in which you have found yourself? Were there any particular processes or practices which you used as part of that? Did they help? Why or why not?

Text

Luke 2:(1-7) 8-20

[In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. All went to their own towns to be registered. Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.]

In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing 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 Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger." And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying,

"Glory to God in the highest heaven,

and on earth peace among those whom he favours!”

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.” So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.

Comment

Our reflection on this second section of the Lucan birth account concentrates on the three verbs which the author uses in verses 18 and 19 to describe the different responses to the events of the narrative. Once again these can provide us with a useful insight to take forward into dynamic situations of change or conflict.

The first responsive verb we meet – here used in relation to ‘all’ who heard the narrative of the Shepherds – is *thaumaz* meaning to wonder or marvel. It suggests a sense of awe and astonishment and it is not difficult to imagine the open-mouthed amazement of those listening to the account of angelic encounter, nor to suppose that the tale was probably preceded by a ‘you’ll never believe what’s just happened’ type of comment! The text gives us the impression of a joyful noisiness around this relation and reception of the shepherd’s tale which continues as they leave the stable perhaps with others in tow who want to hear more, or gathering new listeners attracted by the buzz as they go.

There is no indication as to who this ‘all’ included but it seems reasonable to assume that Mary might well have been one of those in the grip of *thaumaz*. However verse 19 with its qualifying ‘but’ and its specific description of her behaviour indicates that there was another stage in her response to the events of the moment – one which though more interiorly located was nonetheless also very active. Describing this inner activity, Luke uses two verbs – *synt re* (to treasure) and *symball* (to ponder). Each describes a different aspect of Mary’s thinking strategy and these elements are both complementary and synergistic.

The first of the dyad – *synt re* – translated variously as ‘kept’ or ‘treasured’ means to attend to carefully, to watch over. The Greek word has two constituent components which each contribute something distinctive to its implications: *t re* – meaning to attend to carefully/take care of – carries a strong sense of watching over and preserving; while the addition of the preposition *syn* – denoting things which are brought together by association or process – acts as an intensifier giving an additional depth and dimension to the word which is somewhat lost in the English translation. We are told that Mary treasured ‘all these words’ but the Greek has the added dimension of suggesting that what Mary does involves considering them together as a whole – rather like a gestalt.

There is a similar dynamic to *symball* with *syn* once again acting as an intensifier. This time the verb in question is *ball*, meaning to scatter, throw or cast into, and it is the same word that is used in connection with fishing nets in Matt 4:18 and 13:47. Once again there is a strong sense of things being brought into conversation with each other. We can almost imagine Mary throwing a mental net to catch all the different thoughts and sensations of her journey to this point – from annunciation and pregnancy, through the responses of Elizabeth and Joseph to the birth and the visit of the shepherds – and pulling them all together into one place so that she can look at them and see the connections between them and the patterns they form. There is an echo here of the process which Joseph seems to have gone through in the Gospel reading for Advent 4 – but unlike Matthew, Luke makes it explicit.

Mary’s responsive move from wonderment to work provides a helpful pattern for us to follow with respect to situations of change, struggle, or conflict, which complements that seen in the first section of the narrative: in such situations we need to be attentive to all the different elements and dynamics but also to spend time considering these not in isolation but as a whole – looking for patterns and connections which might increase our understanding of what is going on, and give us new insights into how to move forward in a constructive way.

Response

Think of a situation of change or conflict in which you have recently been or are currently involved and write a short summary of it – no more than 3 or 4 sentences. Then take some blank index cards (or small pieces of paper) and spend some time trying to identify and record all the different contributing elements, using a different card to record each one. Now spread out the cards and look at them all together – moving cards around as different patterns and connections come to light. Finish by writing another short summary in the light of any insights coming out of this exercise. Are there any differences between the two?

Prayer

A Collect

God of complexity and connection
of your goodness
grant us sureness and skill as we cast our mental nets,
patience and perseverance in sifting the catch,
and insight and imagination as we ponder its patterns and possibilities,
so that we may treasure these things
in ways which bring understanding, healing and hope
for ourselves and others.
Amen