

Solemnity of Mary, Mother of God

Mary kept all these things, pondering them in her heart. Luke 2, 16-21



At the conclusion of his account of Mary's encounter with the angel Gabriel, Luke understatedly comments: "Mary kept all these things, pondering them in her heart." A capacity to reflect and ponder is something from which we can all benefit. While it's a capacity that comes only with practice, it's probably true that we have all been successful in reflecting deeply on some of the more significant events of our lives. As a consequence, we have grown in maturity and wisdom. However, we know from experience that we are not always capable of reflecting calmly on everything that happens to us. Some experiences leave us in a state of agitation, confusion and anxiety. Other things cause us such endless worry that reflecting on them calmly is almost impossible.

Mary's experience was probably much like our own. The fact that she had received a messenger from God did not shield her from the experiences that are part and parcel of being human. Like every other pregnant woman, she would have hoped and prayed that her pregnancy would be without complications, and that the child she was carrying would be born safe and healthy.

Luke's explicit statement that "she kept all these things in her heart" seems to be saying that she had the good sense not to go about the village claiming that her pregnancy was caused by "the holy Spirit". Such a claim would not have gone down particularly well with the other women in the village, because they all knew exactly how babies were conceived. They would have been equally unimpressed had she decided to announce that she had been visited by an angel of God. They would have regarded her as "certifiable". So the logical consequence of her silence was that she would have had to put up with the gossip and opprobrium that are directed at any young woman who conceives a child outside of marriage.

So, on top of the normal fears and anxieties that all women experience about approaching motherhood, Mary had to deal with the shame associated with unmarried motherhood. However, her capacity to ponder indicates that she discovered that God's presence can be found in the ordinary events and everyday exchanges of life. God is somehow present in the midst of our human fears and anxieties, in our doubts and paranoia, in our misunderstandings, and in our experiences of love and loss.

As we begin yet another year in our lives, it is worth our while to pause to ponder our memories of the year just gone, to reflect on where and how God was present in the ups and downs we experienced. That very exercise will reveal something of the story of God's love for us.

Traditionally, the advent of a new year is linked with resolutions to improve on how we live and act and relate. In his book, *Forty Seasonal Homilies*, retired parish priest, William Bausch offers a parable that might say something to us as we step into 2012:

On the first day, God created the cow. God said: "You must go to the field with the farmer all day long and suffer under the sun, have calves, and give milk to support the farmer, and I will give you a life-span of sixty years."

The cow said: "That's a kind of tough life you want me to live for sixty years. Let me have twenty years, and I'll give back the other forty." And God agreed.

On the second day, God created the dog. God said: "Sit all day by the door of your house and bark at anyone who comes in or walks past. I will give you a life-span of twenty years." The dog said: "That's far too long to be barking. Give me ten years, and I'll give back the other ten." So God, with a sigh, agreed.

On the third day, God created the monkey. God said: "Entertain people, do monkey tricks, make them laugh. I'll give you a twenty year life-span." The monkey said: "How boring! Monkey tricks for twenty years? I don't think so. Dog gave you back ten, so that's what I'll do, too, okay?" And God agreed again.

On the fourth day, God created man. God said: "Eat, sleep, play, and enjoy life. Do nothing, just enjoy yourself. I'll give you twenty years." Man said: "What? Only twenty years? No way, man. Tell you what, I'll take my twenty and the forty cow gave back and the ten dog gave back and the ten monkey gave back. That makes eighty, okay?" "Okay", God said. "You've got a deal."

So that's why for the first twenty years we eat, sleep, play, enjoy life and do nothing. For the next forty years we slave under the hot sun to support our families. For the next ten we do monkey tricks to entertain our grandchildren. And for the last ten years, we sit in front of the house and bark at everybody!

While we can each decide for ourselves where we are in the cow, dog, monkey stages of our lives, we might all benefit from reflecting on the reality that a new year is an invitation into a deeper relationship with God, into a more profound conversion of heart, into being instruments of God's love in our world.

The comforting thing about that is that we don't have to launch into it all alone. Others before us have already built the path by walking it. For instance, many of us would have heard of Sadako, a young Japanese girl who lost her whole family when the atomic bomb was dropped on Hiroshima. Sadako herself suffered severe radiation burns that reduced her life expectancy. Instead of bemoaning the tragedy that had befallen her, she made a conscious decision that each day she would cut out a paper crane and send it to some person she had not met, with an invitation to become an ambassador for world peace. She did just that for the 683 remaining days of her life. When she died, others, inspired by Sadako's initiative, sent off a 684th and a 685th ...What that girl started continues to this day.

We don't have to make paper cranes for peace. However, we can get involved in the St. Vincent de Paul Society or Amnesty International or the Edmund Rice Centre for Justice and Community Education. We can do any one of a number of things to promote justice, heal hurts and bring peace and reconciliation to others, wherever we live and work. That's not such a bad way to usher in a new year. At the very least, it's worth pondering!