

Gleaning In The Fields Of Light

The Treasure We Ponder

By Ken Woodley

What a compelling reaction by Mary in Luke's birth narrative.

She and Joseph are with Jesus in the manger when shepherds arrive, fresh from an encounter with angels. We can imagine them nearly falling over each other to tell Mary and Joseph everything the angels had said about the couple's son.

"Do not be afraid," the angels told the shepherds, because this is "good news for all people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord."

The shepherds were then told to go to the manger to see for themselves.

Those listening to the shepherds' story, Luke tells us, "were amazed."

But what about Mary? Her reaction, more than the others, deserves our attention. Hers was a deep, silent and thoughtful response.

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

And so the mother of Jesus became the first contemplative Christian. She was clearly beginning a meditative journey of contemplation over the meaning of the birth of her son.

Oh, certainly, she had a pretty good idea.

The angel Gabriel, after all, had visited her in Nazareth nine months earlier. You will give birth to a son, Gabriel had told her, conceived by the Holy Spirit, a son to be called Jesus.

"He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David," Gabriel had further explained, "and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever; his kingdom will have no end."

Mary's reaction had often left me perplexed. Why did she need to ponder the shepherd's words? I thought the angel Gabriel had made things clear to her. But then I reconsidered Gabriel's words to Mary. I realized it was just possible that Mary might have done a good deal of wondering during the nine months of her pregnancy. Anybody would be awash in wondering about an encounter with an angel.

“The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever....”

Might not that have meant her son would some day become an earthly king, sitting upon an earthly throne?

The throne of David, after all, was very much an earthly throne and David was an earthly king.

Mary must have wondered about the precise meaning of those words.

People have been wondering about them ever since.

The earliest disciples and apostles wondered who, or what, precisely had that babe in the manger become.

It is so ironic. The question followed Jesus all of his life.

From the very first hours of his life to the final hours before his death—when Pilate asked him “Are you king of the Jews?”—people have wondered about the true meaning and message of that birth.

In the end, each of us will decide for ourselves what that birth in the manger means to us, who this Jesus is in our lives and how that answer influences the way we see the world, what we see in each other, and how we see ourselves.

We can choose to treasure the answering of that question in our hearts, and ponder it for a lifetime, joining Mary in a contemplative journey.

The nuances and subtleties of our answer will develop in different ways during our lifetimes. A spiritual journey is organic, not static. There will be layers of understanding, flashes of clear insight—as if they were spoken to us by an angel—that may, at times, seem like an uncertain mirage or a dream when our daily lives intrude, pushing them to the side. We may also find that we return to previous understandings, but with deeper insight into them.

But if we treasure this and ponder it in our hearts, as Mary did, it will become both sustenance and light for our journey when we need it most.