

Gospel text

Luke 2: 16-21

16 The shepherds hastily set out for Bethlehem, and found Mary and Joseph, as well as the baby lying in the animal feeder. 17 When they saw this, they made known the word which had been spoken to them concerning this child. 18 And all who heard them were astonished at what the shepherds told them. As for Mary, she held back all these events by meditating on them in her heart. 20 And the shepherds returned, recognizing God's extraordinary quality and praising him for all that they had heard and seen, and which mirrored what they had been told.

21 When the time came to circumcise the child, eight days later, he was given the name of Jesus, as the messenger of God had called him before his conception in the womb.

Gospel commentary - Homily

Can life ever be a closed case?

Recently, one of my employees tells me about his daughter. She is 19 years old and has decided to move in with her buddy who lives in the town of Waterloo, 6 hours away by car from home. He expresses his concern as well as the consternation of his spouse. What can we do, he concludes, if not be there when she needs them. She has always been somewhat rebellious, has embarked on several experiments. Her current friend is not so bad, but both will have a precarious life: they both dropped out of school, she found a part-time job, he has a job in a small landscaping company. How far we are from the times not so long ago when a couple was getting married and moving in together: did not we hear parents say that children were now "established", like a classified case?

But can life really ever become a closed case, totally understood, totally controlled thing? If it has not been for Jesus, it will not be any more for us. And do not be fooled by your first impression of the story of the birth of Jesus where everything seems under control and planned in advance: the shepherds receive an announcement from heaven that a savior, Christ Jesus, was born and they will find the infant in a manger, and discovering it as they had been told, they see in it the confirmation of a word of God. Do not forget: the stories of Jesus' childhood are not a video of what happened, but a catechesis that anticipates in baby Jesus this Christ who will not be discovered until after Easter. Otherwise, not only would the story have carried no message at all, but it would have given us logical headaches: first, how could shepherds understand the phrase "Christ the Lord" that was only used after Easter to designate Jesus? Secondly, what could the word savior mean for shepherds, poor people on the margins of the religious community and with a bad reputation, and for whom the expectation of a messiah was not part of their mindset? One might add that it is astonishing that the Gospel mentions no crowd to visit the baby after the passionate testimony of the shepherds.

So how does one read this story? One of the keys is provided by this mention that Mary held all these events meditating in her heart. What does it mean to remember events? We remember an event when we agree not to run away from it, but to let it mark us. On the other hand, we do not remember an event when we turn away from it as if it did not exist, and that happens when it attacks our way of seeing things, or it hurts us a lot. This is why Luke adds: and Mary meditated these events in her heart; we must meditate on events when we have unanswered questions. But accepting to meditate an event is fundamentally a gesture of faith, because it presupposes that this world is understandable and that we can find meaning in an event. Think about it: someone for whom this world is at first totally the result of chance, and therefore incomprehensible and absurd, will not waste time trying to find the meaning of things. Luke thus presents to us in Mary a being of faith, and therefore a being who lives a tension between the pain of unanswered questions and the firm conviction that the source of this world is light and love, and therefore it is worthwhile to keep on trying to understand.

Let's not forget that Mary had her share of unanswered questions, probably beginning with Jesus' decision to leave his work and his family to join John the Baptist and become a traveling preacher. Then there was his distance from the temple and the observance of religious laws, especially the Sabbath. Finally, one can add his arrest and his condemnation to suffer the atrocious fate of slaves and murderers. Put yourself in the place of this mother, how would you react? On top of having heart bleeding, she is facing unanswered questions. Life is so full of mystery for whoever tries to believe. This morning newspaper presented the story of a mother who had twins: one is heterosexual, the other is homosexual. It is difficult to fit all this in our brain. A co-worker tells me about her teenage son who is fighting leukemia: why him, who was so active and had a healthy lifestyle?

When one has unanswered questions, there is a great temptation to eliminate these questions and to avoid reality, or to propose an immediate and simplistic answer. But by showing Mary as a woman who welcomes all the events of her life and agrees to ask questions for as long as it takes, today's account suggests that we will one day find an answer. This is what the shepherds' scene means, even if it is strange that we first present the scene of the denouement before the one presenting the problem.

On the threshold of a new year, we ask ourselves: what will this year be? We will probably experience events that will confuse us, disturb us and hurt us. Living them in faith, as our narrative proposes through the figure of Mary, will imply to welcome these events with open hands and keep up questioning, even if the answers will not be available. Are we ready to live this, we who say we are beings of faith?

-André Gilbert, Gatineau, November 2011