

Homily for Advent 4, 2020

Luke 1:26-38

'Mary's pondering and ours'

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TEXT – Luke 1:26-38

In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, ²⁷to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. ²⁸And he came to her and said, 'Greetings, favoured one! The Lord is with you.' ²⁹But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. ³⁰The angel said to her, 'Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favour with God. ³¹And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. ³²He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. ³³He will reign over the house of Jacob for ever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.' ³⁴Mary said to the angel, 'How can this be, since I am a virgin?' ³⁵The angel said to her, 'The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God. ³⁶And now, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son; and this is the sixth month for her who was said to be barren. ³⁷For nothing will be impossible with God.' ³⁸Then Mary said, 'Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.' Then the angel departed from her.

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INTRODUCTION

What do you ponder?

In your moments of solitude,
Perhaps when you're going for a walk alone,
Lying awake at night,
Waiting for a bus...

In those moments when you have the opportunity just to contemplate things?
To meditate?
To have those inner dialogues where you go back and forth in your own mind and heart...

What do you ponder?

We might ponder the past.
Things that have happened,
things we might have done differently,

why things happened the way they did.

We might ponder the future.
How are things going to turn out,
in this situation or that relationship,
or for that person we care about?

What do you ponder?

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Today in our Gospel reading we meet the virgin Mary.

An unknown young Jewish woman,
Perhaps only a teenager at the time.

And among many other things Mary, the mother of our Lord,
is one who ponders the work of God in her life,
who ponders the word of God to her,
who ponders on the grace and favour of God.

It's a theme that continues after this event,
On two other occasions in Jesus' early life we read that '*Mary **treasured** up all these things,
pondering them in her heart.*' (Luke 2:19)

Mary has what you might call a rich inner life with God,
An inner closeness to God that matures and grows as she ponders all that God has said and
done for her.

In this text we'll see the cause of Mary's pondering,
The content she's given to ponder on,
And consequence at the end.

As we are lead to ponder the work and word and grace of God in our own life.

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THE CAUSE OF MARY'S PONDERING

So what is it that get's Mary pondering to begin with?

Well very specifically it's the strange greeting of the angel Gabriel.

'Greetings, favoured one! The Lord is with you.'

Now there are some big loaded words in this greeting.

The first word could even be translated something like 'rejoice'!

So you have a visit from an angel of God,
Who calls you to rejoice,
Who speaks of you as one having the favour or grace of God,
Who speaks of the Lord's presence with you in some very special way.

And so it's perplexing for Mary,
And she ponders what sort of greeting this is.

She thinking to herself perhaps,
Why is there cause for joy and rejoicing?
What does it mean to be one under God's favour?
In what sense is the Lord with me?

It's interesting that these are all potentially good, positive things,
Joy,
Grace,
The presence of God,

And we know that the reason for all this is that it is through Mary,
That God is entering the world in Christ Jesus to bring salvation.

And yet at this early stage,
this spiritually charged greeting of the angel causes Mary to be perplexed and to ponder on this.

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I wonder whether Mary's pondering here has an aspect of thinking,
'if it seems too good to be true, It probably is'.

We human beings can be very suspicious can't we?

If someone comes to you with an over-the-top greeting which really pumps you up,

You're quite likely thinking,
Something's not right here,
What do they want,
What's coming next?

And more seriously,
When it comes to our encounters with God,

And the words of God to us,

It's not just the hard words we struggle with,

But the words of blessing as well isn't.

You might hear that God loves you,
That he will never leave you,
That Christ Jesus came for you,
That the Lord has called you to serve him,

All wonderful words of God to us,
That because of their grandeur and wonder,

Can actually be hard to take in a funny sort of way.

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But notice carefully that if Mary's initial response does have something of this quality,
She doesn't let suspicion of cynicism take hold.

There's a bit of a contrast here with Zechariah for example – the father of John the Baptist,

Also received a visit from an angel,
Also about a miracles birth,

He too was perplexed and fearful,

The first reaction is a similar one to Marys.

But Zechariah actually ends up getting chastised for his lack of faith in the angels' words,

Whereas what we'll watch develop today is that Mary's journey is one leading to faith.

We all ponder,
We all wonder about the words and promises of God to us,

Mary is the model for us of pondering in faith,
Even though that can go along with doubts and questions.

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THE CONTENT TO PONDER FURTHER

So the angel's greeting has set off her pondering,

And now the angel gives her some more content to ponder on.

Basically, what the angel does is unpack this greeting for Mary.

The first thing to know Mary,
is that you're going to have a baby,
a little boy.

Conception, pregnancy and birth is part of the joy and grace here.

Now of course just this in itself gives Mary plenty to ponder,
To say the least.

It's fascinating that in among all these incredible things the angel says,

It's actually just this simple fact of her pregnancy that Mary hones in on,

'how can this be, since I am a virgin?'

And so the angel explains that this isn't going to be any natural conception,
But a supernatural one,
This conception in the womb will happen by the power of the Holy Spirit of God.

There's something to ponder!

But another aspect of the joy and grace and presence of God in all this is that this boy will in fact be the promised Messiah!

The new David!

The promised King who will rule over an everlasting kingdom.

Parents of course want good things for their children.

As they watch them grow they look out for the qualities, characteristics, gifts and talents they may have and where their children might end up in life.

Can you imagine knowing from the beginning that your child is destined to the promised King!

There's something to ponder!

But then as if all this wasn't enough,

Mary discovers that when the angel Gabriel said the Lord is with her,

He meant it quite literally.

That this child who would be the Messiah,
Will be called holy,
And the Son of God.

Now Son of God in the Old Testament promises seemed to be a sort of honorific title for
God's King,

But now it seems as if the angels is saying that the one born to Mary will actually be the Son
of God in some sense,
That God's holy presence will actually reside in Mary.

There's something to ponder!

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Friends,

The Christian faith is full of wonderful mysteries,

Many of which we confess in our creeds Sunday by Sunday.

We confess that the child Jesus in Mary's womb,
Was '*conceived by the Holy Spirit*'.

We confess that Jesus Christ is both truly God,
And truly a human being.

And we confess that this is all wrapped up with our salvation.

Because in the conception by the Holy Spirit we see God's initiative in coming into our world
to redeem it from the earliest possible moment of the human journey,
In order to redeem and sanctify our humanity.

The grace and mercy and favour of God spoken to Mary,
Is also a word spoken to you.

These mysteries are simply too wonderful to grasp easily,

They need to be pondered,
Savoured,
Enjoyed.

Especially at this time of year,

Nearing Christmas,

With all of the busyness,
With the tumultuous events of the past year,

Even in the routine of Christmas that we've perhaps celebrated so many times before,

Don't let it pass you by without taking time to ponder the wonder of God's word of grace to you.

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THE CONSEQUENCE OF MARY'S PONDERING

And notice finally,
That Mary's pondering does not remain only internal.

Remember earlier I reference Zechariah.

He was perplexed at the angel's message from God,

Just like Mary's,

But his grew in a different direction.

Later in the Gospel's we see even worse examples.

Where people's opposition to Jesus is also a part of their internal dialogues,

They ponder in their hearts,
Not the grace and favour of God for them,

But they ponder how to rebel against God,
How to get their hands on his Son.

And isn't that how it can be for us?

The ponderings of our minds and hearts aren't so often on the things of God,
As they are filled with things of which we'd be ashamed if they were out in the open.

Whereas Mary is the model of one who faithfully ponders God's gracious words to her,

And then responds in faith and obedience and submission to God's will for her.

'Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.'

Now,
At this point,
It's not that Mary's ponderings have lead her to completely take in and understand everything the angels has just told here.

It's not that her ponderings have lead her to the place everything has been neatly squared away and she gets it all and know exactly how it's going to work out.

She's surely thinking about the conversation she's going to have with Joseph,
Not to mention the rest of the her family and the community and all that this might mean.

She can't possible have known all that this meant and would mean for her in the short term,
And especially not in the long term.

And so you wonder whether through Mary's life,
As she watched her Son grow,
And she watched his ministry,
And she watched the opposition to him grow,
And she watched him crucified,

You wonder whether her ponderings continued on this greeting of the angel all those years ago,

Rejoice, favoured one,
The Lord is with you.

Even now Lord,
Even as my Son the Messiah hangs on a cross?

Yes, even now Mary.

Perhaps it was only in his resurrection,
In the coming of the Spirit at Pentecost,

That all her ponderings began to come together.

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So it is with us.

We hear the words of God to us,

We ponder them,
We struggle with them at times,

And we aren't called to have it all worked out,
To grasp all the mysteries with perfect understanding,

But we are called to respond in faith,

Faith is letting God have the last word.

'Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.'

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CONCLUSION

So,
What do you ponder?

As you naturally ponder the past,
As you look forward and ponder the future,

I pray that this Christmas you may ponder anew the grace of God in Jesus Christ,
And his words of favour.

A grace that was shown to a young Jewish teenager in a most remarkable way,
And a grace that has been shown to each and every one of you also.

Don't let the wonder of that pass you by one more day,
without taking time to ponder it anew.

God grant it for Jesus' sake, Amen.