

Luke 2: 15-20 – Tell and Treasure

Prayer

So that was 2023. And that was Christmas. How was it for you? Noisy? Quiet? Ours was more noisy than quiet, but we're hoping to restore the balance over the next few days. Then it's back to school, back to work, back to the routines, and the diet starts again...

We heard all the story, thought about the shepherds hurrying down to Bethlehem to see the new born king, but frankly there's only so much time you can stare at a new baby, and Mary was tired and Jesus needed feeding and changing – so the shepherds went back to the fields. But they had a story to tell and they told it, and they praised God for all they had seen and heard. They were the noisy ones.

And Mary? Mary didn't move around telling her story. The picture Luke paints is in altogether quieter tones. Mary treasured all that had happened and pondered these things in her heart. Treasured and pondered. Obviously Mary was not highly educated, but she could certainly think and ponder, lovely word. It's about holding something in your hand, examining it from all angles. I love rocks and stones – have some here – always carry some in my pocket, great for fiddling...

So that was how the shepherds and Mary moved on – in the shorter term, anyway. We have no idea what happened to those shepherds. Just as suddenly as they appear in the Bible story, they leave again and we don't know whether they continued and eventually joined Jesus' followers and the early church. Or maybe the experience just faded for them. They remembered it as a special time but the impact rather diminished over time. My guess is that at least one of them kept in touch with Jesus and told the story that got passed on to Luke. We don't know. They had to return to the hills and their work with the sheep. Because of their work they weren't really part of any community other than their own.

Over the years I've met a number of people who have had really significant encounters with Jesus, but then we've lost touch, and they haven't actually got stuck in to a church family. That incidentally is a lot harder than some of us who are comfortable here remember or realise. There have been various surveys that show a substantial proportion of the UK population have had a significant religious experience. That's a higher proportion – a lot higher – than the number who come to church. It raises interesting questions about how we relate to them? And are we expecting them to make all the adjustments?

There are a couple of clues that can help us – the shepherds talked about what had happened to them; they didn't keep it to themselves. And it is true that if we talk to others about what God is doing in our lives that does build us up and make us stronger in our faith. Talking about what Jesus has done for you is one of the best ways of growing spiritually. And it's something no-one else can do for you. The second clue is that the shepherds praised and glorified God for everything that they had heard and seen. They told others and turned the news into praise. They worshipped and they worshipped together. It is jolly hard to keep coming to church and remaining faithful, but it is harder, much harder, to stay outside the Christian family, the church, and stay faithful to Jesus.

It's Mary who shows us that it's not all about the externals – what we do and what others can see. We do know much more about what happened to her. She was there at the cross with her son when

he was killed. Tradition has it that she lived to a ripe old age, looked after by John the apostle. She stuck with Jesus, although it was not easy for her, not all the sweetness and light of the Christmas story. And neither will it be for anyone who decides to follow Jesus. Mary had to be strong to be faithful.

And the start of that is here in our reading, when she treasured and pondered these things in her heart. Mary – the mother of her Lord, the bearer of Christ. In the early church they gave her a name *Theotokos* – the God-Bearer. How much do we treasure the life of Jesus in us? That God himself through the Holy Spirit lives within us, closer than breath itself. Mary pondered these things.

What will 2024 bring? Who knows? Can we not make some space to treasure and ponder the good news of Jesus before we rush on in busyness? Spoiler alert – 2024 in the parish is going to be a year when we have a special focus on worship. That's not a list of activities, which will count for very little without this internal treasuring and pondering of who Jesus is for us, which is why we are moving on now to gather round the table, recalling and remembering his story, letting him feed us...

Prayer