

Time to ponder ...

Luke 2: 1-20

Do you ever listen to the news and get discouraged, wondering what is happening in our world? After the year we've just had, it will be hard to say no to that question. In the midst of a global pandemic, a declining economy, the inevitable fallout from Brexit, do you ever question God about those who are in charge of nations? God, it seems, has a habit of working in the most unlikely of places, and through the most unlikely of people.

In our reading from Luke's gospel, we notice the Emperor, Caesar Augustus, exercising his power and declaring that *'a census should be taken of the entire Roman world'*. Yet, in the midst of this display of power, this ability to command the movement of large groups of people at will, with all its accompanying noise and chaos, we are taken to a baby lying in a manger. We are reminded that, amid the voices of power and the noise of life, God is quietly and gently and always present, working in the most unexpected places.

There is something about taking the time to notice. Recognising that in the ordinariness of our everyday lives, God is at work. Imagine the shepherds in the field that night, tending to their sheep as usual. A night much like any other, maybe huddled together around a fire for warmth, shepherds chatting, sharing conversation before turning in for some much-needed sleep. Then, all of a sudden, an angel appearing and instructing them to go to Bethlehem to *'see this thing that has taken place'*. How wonderful that they encountered God in their place of work! Not in a synagogue or temple; not in a place when spiritual things are 'meant' to happen. And having got their attention, God takes them to the basement of an ordinary home.

In a year where the home has become the workplace for many of us, and not just the workplace but also the school, the college, the university, and the place where we've been kept safe, is God trying to get your attention - in order to look where?

In the familiar reading from Isaiah 9 on Christmas Day, a poetic account of a military victory is transformed by the understanding that victory is achieved, or at least marked, in the birth of a baby:

*'For to us a child is born', we read,
'to us a son is given,
and the government will be on his shoulders.
And he will be called Wonderful Counsellor,*

*Mighty God, Everlasting Father,
Prince of Peace.'*

The birth of a child in war is a poignant sign of hope. In the past, commentators suggested that Jesus was born during one of a very few periods of sustained peace in the world – or the known, Roman world. However, it's not clear that this claim is sustainable for the famed 'Pax Romana' – Roman Peace – was sustained only by threat of military violence. Not that dissimilar to some countries around the world today where it's argued that peace is only maintained by lavish spending on the military, while all around children are born (and die) in poverty. How is the birth of Jesus a sign of peace today?

In our reading from Luke's gospel, Emperor Augustus is portrayed as someone capable of ordering people half a world away to move around 'to be registered'. This is repeated three times in just three verses. But still today, there are people who have inordinate power over others half a world away. World politicians come readily to mind, but what of those who influence the world's media and social media, not just the owners, but also so-called 'opinion formers' with millions of 'followers'. But in our gospel reading, the focus quickly moved from such powerful people – from Caesar Augustus to Mary. Mary, an ordinary girl from an ordinary town. Mary who, we read, pondered all that happened on that first night, pondered those things in her heart.

A few days ago, I came across a poem called 'The First Christmas' by Marian Swinger. It goes like this:

*It never snows at Christmas in that dry and dusty land.
Instead of freezing blizzards, there are palms and drifting sands,
and years ago a stable and a most unusual star
and three wise men who followed it, by camel, not by car,
while, sleepy on the quiet hills, a shepherd gave a cry.
He'd seen a crowd of angels in the silent starlit sky.
In the stable, ox and ass stood very still and calm
and gazed upon the baby, safe and snug in Mary's arms.
And Joseph, lost in shadows, face lit by an oil lamp's glow
stood wondering, that first Christmas Day,
two thousand years ago.*

Our Christmas, different this year as it may be, will be very different to that first Christmas Day in the poem. But however we spend Christmas Day, I pray that each of us will find some space to stop still and simply ponder. To ponder and wonder, like Mary and indeed Joseph, at the Christ-child in the manger.