

'And pondered them in her heart...'

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"But Mary kept all these things, and pondered them in her heart." (Luke 2: 19)

In the Prado in Madrid hangs one of Fra Angelico's greatest paintings. It is a painting of the Annunciation. It is in three sections. On the left a guilty Adam and Eve, half-eaten, discarded fruit at their feet, leave the paradise of Eden, pointed on their way by an angel. In the centre, under a rich canopied porch painted in lapis lazuli blue, the archangel Gabriel, with wings outstretched, stoops before the Virgin, who sits on the far right of the picture, a book spread on her knee, and her hands crossed before her breast in a gesture of reverence. Gabriel too has his arms crossed, an angelic messenger and simple girl incline towards each other in a touching expression of mutual awe and wonder. Above Gabriel's head in a blazing ray of glory, the Spirit in the form of a dove speeds towards Mary. That shaft of light, that ray of glory, originates in a brilliance at the top left of the picture, where the hand of God is dimly seen bestowing the gift of His own life through the overshadowing of the Spirit. The painter - surely intentionally — places that bright cloud, the *Shekinah* of God's glory, directly above the scene of the expulsion from Paradise, reminding us that even in that very moment of rebellion, of sin and fall, God's loving and creative purpose could not be thwarted, but was still to redeem. The sin of Adam is, through God's redeeming grace, found to be *felix culpa*, a happy fault. Out of the very situation of human rejection, disobedience and sin God acts to redeem and to transform.

In composing his picture in this way Fra Angelico points us to an ancient Christian theme, which sees in Mary's obedient response the reversal of the disobedience of Eve. The *Ave!* (*Hail!*) with which Gabriel greets Mary is a literal reversal of Eva. In *Mary's fiat voluntas tua*, 'let it be to me according to your word' the kingdom of God comes, and it comes in the Creator's presence to His creation in the closest of unions.

*She bowed her to the angel's word
Believing what the Father willed,
And suddenly the promised Lord
That pure and hallowed temple filled.*

In this moment of incarnation, God's goodness, as Lady Julian of Norwich liked to say, *comes down to the very lowest part of our need*. Here in the womb of Mary, God takes our human nature from its very beginning, He is one with unborn life. He went, as the great seventeenth-century bishop of Winchester, Lancelot Andrewes, liked to say, 'to the very ground-sill of our nature' — so I have from time to time used a piece of groundsel — that humble weed — as a Christmas flower.

Mary, says St Luke, at the end of his story of the birth at Bethlehem, and the shepherds and the angels, and the child in a manger, *kept all these things and pondered them in her heart*. The Greek word is $\sigma\upsilon\beta\alpha$???, from which we get our word 'symbol'. It speaks of devout and deep meditation, a pondering which passes into prayer, a reflecting which is contemplative and marked by awe and by wonder. It was this text which John Henry Newman chose to preach on in 1843 in the last of the sermons he preached before the University of Oxford. He preached that sermon on another feast of Mary, the Purification — or Candlemas, or the Presentation of Christ in the Temple — a feast of special significance to him, as to John Keble, when they were both Fellows of Oriel, for it was the college's patronal festival. Newman took this text for a powerful sermon in which he explored the whole question of the development of Christian doctrine, how the Church, how generations of Christians, in new and changing circumstances have wrestled to set out Christian truth. Newman was always convinced that Christianity was revelation, God making Himself known in the history of a people, and pre-eminently in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ So he wrote in his great hymn, *Praise to the Holiest in the height*, of how

.... a *higher gift than grace*
Should flesh and blood refine,
God's presence and his very self
And Essence all-divine.

Revelation was, however, also mystery. We cannot see the distant scene; our knowledge of God is, as Newman said elsewhere, of mountains seen at twilight, or, to use an image he did not himself use, like the vastness of the ocean illuminated only by a flickering lamp. Philosophers, said Newman, offer us 'painful inductions from existing phenomena,' but the God who made us and to whom we pray is not an 'assemblage of notions', but a love who reaches out to draw us home, for we are made in the image of that love. John Keble taught him what he had learnt from Bishop Butler that 'probability was the guide of life', that faith was a universal principle, and that Christian reasoning was more than analytic dissection. Newman and Keble and the fathers of the Oxford Movement taught a sacramental devotion, which moved the heart and kindled the imagination, knowing that God gave himself to His people through symbol and image, and above all in these holy mysteries. The attentiveness of prayer, the wonder reflected in poetry, was a key element in their understanding of Christian faith and its communication. They stood firm in their times against what John Keble called 'the nominalism of the day', which resolved the great truths of the Christian faith into mere opinions. As Newman said when as a Roman Catholic he received his cardinal's hat from Pope Leo XIII, he had spent all his life fighting against 'liberalism', by which he meant the heresy of resolving truth into an opinion, the nineteenth century version of contemporary cultural relativism, or the pick and mix of post-modernism.

In our world today education is all too often the acquisition of technical skills. It can seem remote from the exclamation of St Augustine that *when I have found the truth, I have found Thee, O my God!* Creativity and imagination are strained through inappropriate quantitative sieves. Only rarely is the question asked 'who is it that we are educating?' What is it to be a human being? In what does human flourishing consist? How can, to use

the words of a mediaeval mystic, William of St-Thierry, 'the understanding of the thinker become the contemplation of the lover'? As Christians we have to stand for an education of the whole human being, for spiritual growth, and an awareness of the mystery of God, and an insistence that men and women are made in the image of his love to grow into His likeness. 'To act you must assume,' wrote Newman, 'and that assumption is faith.' The human being is a 'seeing, contemplating, acting animal', and if we do not live by Christian faith, be assured we will live by some other faith, for the gods are many, and the idols are attractive.

Jesus taught us that the first and great commandment was the love of God, with all our heart, and mind, and soul and strength — a responsive love with the whole of our being, to the love that made us and gives us meaning and purpose. Eastern religions can deny the world because it is illusion; Jews and Christians believe the world to be God's creation, and therefore its exploration through both arts and science is in the end an *Itinerarium mentis ad Deum* — the journey of the mind to God - and not only our mind, but the choosing of our hearts and our wills, the totality of what we give our lives to be, how we are shaped in service, and in the working out of the love of God in love of neighbour, for no one, as St John reminds us can love God whom he has not seen unless he loves his neighbour whom he has seen. Christianity is always an incarnational religion. As Henry Scott Holland one of the second generation of the Oxford Movement put it pungently — 'you cannot believe in the incarnation and not be concerned about drains' — and we might add, about AIDS, and hunger, and peace, and justice. Faith and hope and love belong together. All involve risk, a risk that Mary the village girl of Nazareth took, when she responded to the messenger of God, and her awesome vocation, *I am the handmaid of the Lord, let it be to me according to thy word.*

She kept all these things, and pondered them in her heart, and the pondering, the loving meditation, the praying and the praising have gone on down the centuries. The Church is called to share with our Blessed Lady that deep pondering and reflecting and being transformed by the mystery of Love's redeeming work.

Because the revelation of the God who made us is necessarily also a mystery, we grasp and are grasped by that mystery through symbols and images. The pattern of Christian truth proclaimed in creed and liturgy and art and worship is brought home to us through those symbols and images. In a world whose utilitarian concern has blinded it to the symbolic communication of Christian truth the Church needs to be alert to being drawn into that world of utilitarian functional relativism. In Newman's poem, *The Dream of Gerontius*, Gerontius after death is being led by the angel into the presence of God, but is puzzled by where he is. The angel tells him that he is *wrapped and swathed around in dreams, dreams that are true, yet enigmatical, for the belongings of thy present state, save through such symbols come not home to thee.*

Not only the soul of Gerontius after death, but all of us who are called to live out the Christian mystery of grace, redemption and sanctification, find ourselves, not least in the mystery of the Eucharist, which Augustine said rightly was the mystery of ourselves, encountering that which is true but inexpressible. Like Mary we can only ponder that mystery in our heart,

and find that indeed the secret is this, *Christ in you, the hope of glory*. As we live that mystery, we affirm with St Irenaeus that *the glory of God is a man – a human being – truly alive, and that the end of man is the vision of God*. That is indeed what you and I, and indeed all humankind, is ultimately about.

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