

THE REACTION TO THE FIRST PROCLAMATION OF THE BIRTH OF CHRIST

“... and all who heard it wondered at what the shepherds had told them. But Mary kept all these things, pondering them in her heart. And the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them”.

(Luke 2: 18-20)

Practically everyone in some way or another celebrates Christmas. I cannot think of anyone who is not at least to some extent affected by the seasonal “Christmas spirit.” There may be the die-hard cynic who says that “Christmas” means nothing to him, but deep down everyone shares something of the feeling of Christmas. It is hard to escape it with all the commercial hype and seasonal sentimentality.

As I have stated before, do not think that it is wrong to enter the Christmas “feeling.” If you are, like me, a romantic at heart, you cannot help being sentimental at such occasions. And for children, especially, it is an exciting time of the year. Youngsters can have strong feelings about Christmas.

The late Dr. K. Schilder, a well-known Reformed scholar who died in the early fifties, once wrote an article on the topic: “Feeling” and Christmas. He agreed that we may at Christmas time experience a sense of particular joy, even if this joy is based in part on enjoying the cosiness of family gatherings.

CHESTNUTS AND JACK FROST

Christmas does have its own cozy atmosphere, with “Chestnuts roasting on open fire, Jack Frost nipping at your nose.” Christmas is indeed the time to be with family and friends, a time of sharing, out of which great memories are born.

At the same time, Dr. Schilder warned that Christmas must not be merely a matter of *feeling*, but essentially a matter of *faith*. It is not a feast determined by fantasy but governed by facts. He remarked that many people who like to emphasize the feeling often deny or neglect the facts of Christmas. The romantic idealists of the previous century were among the first to deny the virgin birth.

In this connection Schilder warned that we do not “romanticize” Christmas because of its cozy atmosphere. We cannot just “feel” Christmas, we must believe Christmas. We must see its significance, not as an isolated event, but within the framework of God’s work of salvation. On Christmas Day we must note the facts and place them in their proper biblical light. We must reflect on the meaning of the facts for us today. We must *reflect*, not reminisce or merely pause, but deeply ponder, and come away, amazed, with praise and thanksgiving!

This is the direction in which the Bible itself points us in Luke 2. The narrative concerning Christ’s birth ends with the praise of the shepherds, people who came away from Bethlehem with the faith that a great and mighty wonder had occurred, and who were *therefore* filled with a special feeling.

We want to take a look at what the Bible tells us about the reaction of the people who were directly involved with the first Christmas to the public proclamation of the birth of Christ in their midst. What did they do with it? How did it affect and change their lives? And from there on we want to see how it must affect us who have greater knowledge and deeper insight.

THE HESITANT AMAZEMENT OF THE PEOPLE

Admittedly, it is not easy to reconstruct exactly how everyone reacted. Besides, people often react wrongly or later change their minds. People are fickle;

you can't really do much with their initial reactions. But still it is not without reason that Luke records these reactions. He does so in order that we may learn what is pleasing to God, and what reaction He requires of us. That is what we want to discover: what is the LORD God telling us in this passage of Scripture?

The shepherds' initial reaction to the message of the angels was one of great enthusiasm. The appearance of the angels was too majestic to ignore. And so we read that these simple men went with haste to Bethlehem (verse 16), and after some searching, they found Mary and Joseph, and the babe "lying in a manger," just as it had been told them.

We read in verse 17, "And when they saw it, they made known the saying which had been told them concerning this child." Undoubtedly the shepherds told Mary and Joseph what had happened in the fields of Ephrathah, and they, in turn, will have been told by Mary and Joseph the circumstances leading up to the birth of Jesus. There must have been an excited interchange of information.

Apparently the shepherds had no difficulty accepting the truth of what they had seen. They may not have fully understood every aspect, but it was clear to them: this child is the promised seed of David, the Messiah of God! And faith led to a public confession. The shepherds became evangelists. Indeed, when you want an example of spontaneous evangelism, look for it on Christmas morning: they made known the saying which had been told them concerning this child. They went out and spoke of the message of the angels. They had no direct mandate for this, but it was a matter of course: they could not do otherwise but proclaim the Word concerning this child.

Now shepherds were generally not the most respected and trusted types in Israel. As a matter of fact, they were held in very low esteem. Still, it will have come as a great surprise to the people who heard them speak to hear such a message. What? Our great King, born here, in a stable? What is it these men are telling us?

It says in Luke 2: 18, ". . . and all who heard it wondered at what the shepherds told them." It does not say how many people heard the testimony of the shepherds. There are many details which Luke does not mention. But we may safely assume, given the way words tend to travel, that a good number of people in Bethlehem and vicinity heard about what had happened. And, as one explainer notes, since Jerusalem was only six miles from Bethlehem, it is quite possible that even some of the citizens of Jerusalem heard stories about the strange happenings in and around Bethlehem.

Luke does not say that all these people outrightly rejected what was told them by the shepherds. On the contrary, the Jews were quite open for supernatural occurrences. It says that they wondered; literally, that they marvelled. They were amazed by the whole story. This means that it was something completely unexpected. It became the talk of the town. Perhaps some of the villagers went to look for themselves to see whether the stories of the shepherds about a babe in a manger were true. If they went, they could indeed see the child and hear what Mary and Joseph had to say. But it is possible that not that many took the trouble to go and look. The shepherds' tale may have appeared too fantastic and incredible.

Still, people wondered. They did not shrug it off without any further thought. They did not reject it immediately. And they were puzzled by the whole thing: what could it possibly mean?

Imagine this conversation taking place, somewhere in Bethlehem. Did you hear what these shepherds were telling in the village this morning? What do you make of it? I don't know, but it doesn't seem plausible to me! Why would the angels appear to them, the shepherds, and not to us, the citizens of Bethlehem? Yes, come to think of it, the whole thing is rather strange, isn't it?

I suggested that people generally reacted with hesitant amazement. They did not conceal their surprise; they may even have been moved by the story, but it does not appear that their lives were really affected. There was a hesitation which led them away from the importance of the facts. Soon they would go on with the things of everyday life. The testimony of the shepherds caused a ripple on the pond of life in Bethlehem, but that was about it. In the end, people shrugged their shoulders and carried on as before.

CHRISTMAS: FLEETING FASCINATION

All who heard it, wondered. Now I ask myself if this is not the most common reaction to the Christmas happening, also today. People are generally fascinated by the Christmas story. It has all the ingredients of an amazing tale. At Christmas time many people may even think for a moment: isn't it remarkable that this child was born in such a manner? Such a lowly birth and yet such lofty ideals!

People wonder about this birth. They may not immediately shrug it off as nonsense, but they often do not come much beyond "wondering." There is also today a hesitant amazement. There may be agreement in principle about at least some of the facts, but without commitment in practice. Many people around us will "believe" that Jesus was born on Christmas Day. But they hesitate to go any further; it has no impact on their lives. Therefore, they soon forget and move on to more important things. In fact, then, Christmas does not really function in their lives. It is merely a fleeting fascination.

It's not that most people do not know. But they only pay attention to what they themselves like to hear. They have made the real history into a sentimental story, as a setting for a man-centred feast, in which also some homage is paid to God. Never do we hear more carols or hymns on our television and radio stations than at Christmas time. But what effect does this really have on society? People will have to come further than expressing just a hesitant amazement. They will have to stop and think about what has really happened.

MARY'S PONDERING

But we see a certain progression here in this passage. The people wondered. But, Luke writes, indicating sharp contrast, ". . . Mary kept all these things, pondering them in her heart." There's a lot of difference between "wondering" and

“pondering,” is there not?

Mary does come a step further than most other people. Now, of course, you can write that off as maternal love and care. Every new mother (especially with her first child) is very keenly tuned in to whatever is said about her child. It may be that Mary was at first somewhat disappointed at the circumstances in which her son was born. The angel had said to her (Luke 1: 32 ff.), “He will be great, and be called the Son of the Most High, and the LORD will give to Him the throne of His father David. . . ,” but it surely did not look that way at all. It was no birth fit for a king! Therefore, the arrival and the testimony of the shepherds will have given Mary a lift and strengthened her weary soul: it is true, my son is destined for great things after all! What mother would not carefully note all that is said about her first-born child?

A HIGHER SPIRITUAL LEVEL

But perhaps we should place this on a higher spiritual level. Mary’s reaction is indeed maternal, typically that of a mother, but it is also more than that. We read first: she kept all these things. This means: she observed and listened very carefully. There was no detail which escaped her that morning, despite her weakened condition. And she accurately committed all these things to her mind and memory. Whatever she will forget in life, not this! She will have other children, but none of them will be born under these circumstances and be surrounded with such testimony.

It was very important that Mary committed these things carefully to memory. For did she not have to testify later about the facts and their sequence? It is quite possible that Luke, who writes this account, himself heard it from Mary. When Luke wrote his Gospel, Mary could very well have been still alive, an elderly woman of about eighty. In any case, Luke himself tells us in chapter 1 that he “followed all things closely,” that is, he conducted a careful investigation, using reliable sources. One of the sources used in the gospels was the careful and detailed knowledge of Mary.

But Mary does more than just memorize the facts. Committing something to memory does not necessarily mean that you understand what is happening. To know the facts is one thing; to interpret them is another. Luke says: Mary kept all these things, pondering them in her heart. “Pondering” means that you give a matter some deep thought. The original Greek verb means something like: bringing together, collecting. Mary notes the facts, and tries to piece things together. How does the testimony of the shepherds accord with her own experiences? Is there a clear line? Is there a significant and consistent development?

DIGESTING IN FAITH

Mary is asking herself: what does it mean? What does it tell me about this my

child? It says that she ponders all this *in her heart*. The heart is the core of life. I believe that these words mean that she is digesting also these new developments *in faith*. She already believes that her Son is the Messiah, the Son of God. The angel Gabriel told her so. And what now happens is a clear confirmation of that early message. Mary knows that the long and difficult months of pregnancy have been vindicated. The Lord God has remained true to His promise. Even if the outward circumstances of this birth do not bear it out, this child is indeed the Son of David, Christ the Lord!

We are in this passage not presented with the thoughts of a proud mother, but we are taught that the Lord God caused Mary to piece things together, to tie in previous revelations with new revelations, and so to get a good view on the entire matter! For this is the activity of the believer. See how it all fits. See how it all points to one inescapable conclusion: Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God. And that is how we must receive this Word of God today.

Maternal pondering, yes. But it is certainly done in a spiritual manner: facts are put together in the perspective of divine revelation. Mary is here more than just a mother; she is already a believer. And we must be more than spectators, for we, too, must put things together in the light of God's entire revelation.

Now I know that Mary still had a long way to go. She had to learn to divest herself of motherly pride. She had to learn not to stand in the way of the Son of God. She had her plans and expectations which did not always accord with God's plans. She had to step back so that He could step forward in His own time. She had to learn that, although He was her son, He was also her Lord! She had to come to confess Him as her Saviour. She would have to stand at the foot of His cross. She would also have to experience the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. Mary was just a beginner on the path of faith. But there was a decisive beginning.

Faith always begins with hearing the Word, with keeping it in mind and pondering it, with piecing the facts together in the light of all God's revelation. We must accept this, no matter how much we have to deny ourselves. Believe me, Mary had to learn self-denial! So do we! It begins on Christmas Day: we must see in this child the Saviour of God and receive Him personally as such. And then we must go and glorify God for what He has given us in his Son.

EXUBERANT PRAISE OF THE SHEPHERDS

For there is yet one reaction which we must consider in this passage, namely that of the shepherds, with whom we started. We saw how they went to Bethlehem in haste, and how they proclaimed to all whom they met what they had heard and seen. Of these shepherds we are finally told, "And the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they heard and seen, as it had been told them" (verse 24).

The way this is stated indicates joyous *exuberance*. These men are really filled with great excitement and happiness. They cannot cease to talk about it and they

constantly relive each moment of that wondrous night and day. I imagine an exuberant, boisterous group of men returning to their flocks filled with a deep wonder which cannot be hidden. Glorifying and praising God is usually a visible and audible affair, don't you think?

I think that we have here the *climax* of the Christmas story. This is what the Lord God envisioned from the very beginning: that His Name would be praised, not just by angels, but by His people! Here we see the real height of the progression in "the first Noel," if I may use that term.

Remember how it started? With a mighty angelic choir singing: Glory to God in the highest! That must have been wonderful music in God's ears! But this is how it ends: joyful men going on their way rejoicing and glorifying God. And it is the praise of His people that God seeks! More important to Him than the beautiful songs of the angels is the simple praise of His children on earth. That's the teaching of the Bible. And when this is combined, angels and men glorifying God together, is there any symphony more exalted?

The shepherds have to go back to their flocks, of course. Life goes on. Their task waits. But they return vastly different from the way they came. It says that they go glorifying and praising God.

Now these two words, glorifying and praising, basically mean the same. The first word glorifying means to magnify, to make great. And it has the connotation: to make great on the basis of the facts. It is not really the shepherds who make God great. God shows His greatness in the facts of salvation!

The second word, praising, has in it the notion of granting joyous approval to something. It means to *concur* with the facts! It implies a deep sense of agreement. So take that together: the shepherds go on their way, recognizing that God is great because of what He has done, and they give their agreement and assent to this work. God is great! The facts demonstrate it. They concur with it, and so they share in it.

Notice also how it says: glorifying God for all they had heard and seen. First *heard*: from the angel and the angelic host. The heavenly Word precedes the human vision. But also *seen*: for the eyes see what God has said. The facts bear out the truth of the Word. It is not the other way around: first seeing and then perhaps hearing an explanation later, but first hearing and then seeing that it is exactly as it had been told them.

I repeat: the revelation of God has priority. If the shepherds had not first heard the message from heaven, they never would have "seen" in this child their King and Saviour. But now they return glorifying and praising God. For He shows that His Word is Truth. He causes His people to see things which they otherwise never would have noticed. So the Word becomes flesh.

On Christmas Day we have the calling to start with what God has said and has been proclaimed also to us. This is what we must believe. And whoever believes

will also see! For us this means that we will see Christ, not as a babe in a manger, but as glorified King, seated on the throne of heaven. If we believe this, we, too, will come to the level of praise that is required. We will acknowledge the greatness of God in His work of redemption in Jesus Christ, born in such a simple yet wondrous manner.

ENDURING JOY?

I have often wondered about these shepherds. We do not read about them anymore in the Gospels. Did their faith withstand the test of time? Did their great joy endure? Or were they, like many others, later greatly offended at Christ's ministry? Perhaps several of them never lived to see the day, some thirty years later, that He was crucified, perhaps some did. What happened to these first witnesses, these first evangelists, these first confessors of Christ?

We do not know. And is it really important for us personally? The question for us is: what is *our* reaction? In light of all that we know today, do we earnestly believe with our whole heart, and truly love the Lord Jesus? Will our faith withstand the test of time in our days? Will our joy endure? We have not seen the babe in the manger, but we do have the completed revelation of God. We have access to a Saviour Who is now glorified in heaven after having finished His work on earth. Let these shepherds not one day testify against us because of our unbelief or lack of commitment. But let their praise lead us to stand in greater awe of God's great work of salvation in Jesus Christ. Let us praise God's Name exuberantly, with audible and visible joy! Let us pray for a childlike and enthusiastic faith, which leads to joyous testimony and life-long commitment. Then the feeling of Christmas never ends, but carries over to the marriage feast of the Lamb, where we may mingle our voices with those of the angels in never-ending praise: glory to God and peace on earth!