

As we begin a new year, we surely all hope for something better. If the past has not been altogether good, and if our hopes have not been fulfilled, we now have a fresh opportunity that we feel we ought to avail of. That seems a reasonable and desirable way to begin the year. But it is not enough! It would be wrong for us as believers if we failed to ask ourselves what God expects of us in this New Year. The Church wants us to start the year with our attention focussed on Mary, the Mother of God. Mary teaches us not to plan our lives without reference to God's plans. A life that ignores God's plan is not worth living. And this is not all. In Mary, God reminds us that he will work miracles in us and through us, if we make room for him in our lives and pay him more attention. Our life is of little value, if God cannot count on us.

At that time: ¹⁶ the shepherds went with haste to Bethlehem, and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby lying in a manger. ¹⁷ And when they saw it they made known the saying which had been told them concerning this child; ¹⁸ and all who heard it wondered at what the shepherds told them. ¹⁹ But Mary kept all these things, pondering them in her heart. ²⁰ And the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them. ²¹ And at the end of eight days, when he was circumcised, he was called Jesus, the name given by the angel before he was conceived in the womb.

Read: understand what the text says, focusing on how it says it

The role of Mary is more prominent in Chapter 2 of St Luke's Gospel, than in Chapter 1. The events recorded are less portentous and closer to everyday life. Their place in world history is recorded (Lk 2,1-5). The account of the birth of Jesus (Lk 2,6-20) draws attention to Mary's obedience. Mary fulfilled God's will, giving birth to Jesus. In the light of all this, it is strange that the mother of Jesus is not given the central role in the story of the nativity. She appears only at the beginning (Lk 2,5-7) and the end (Lk 2,16-19.21).

After the account of the birth of Jesus at Bethlehem (Lk 2,1-7) and the angel's message to the shepherds (Lk 2,8-14), these events show that what had been foretold was fulfilled, and their meaning is revealed (Lk 2,15-20). When they found Mary with the infant, as they had been told (Lk 2,12.16), the shepherds were no longer simply hearers of the word – they became "evangelizers" of the parents of Jesus. Like Mary, they discovered in the angel's revelation a task to be fulfilled. While the angels returned to their world (Lk 1,38), the shepherds set out for Bethlehem (Lk 2,15). The shepherds wanted to see what they had been told. They followed the directions received from God without hesitation (Lk 1,39) and went to the place indicated. They knew exactly what they were looking for and followed precise instructions. They found more than had been foretold (Lk 2,12) – the newborn child was surrounded by a family (Lk 2,16), in which the role of Mary stands out (Lk 2,7.19.34-35.48.51). No one could have imagined a messiah lying in a manger. When they had confirmed the truth of what had been announced (Lk 2,17), the shepherds themselves became announcers. The family of God was evangelized by shepherds (Lk 2,18)! They had been enlightened by God's glory, and they brought the light to where the family of God was to be found. The general reaction was one of surprise. All who heard it were amazed by what had been told them by the shepherds.

Now the scene focuses on Mary and her reaction (Lk 2,19). She remembered all that had happened, pondering it in her heart. Mary did not reject what she did not understand. She accepted even what she was unable to comprehend. In her heart she tried to put some order on what had happened and to make sense of it. Instead of simply remaining in admiration and surprise at what God had done in her, Mary tried to enter into the mystery with an intelligent heart. She continued to meditate in an attitude of faith (Lk 1,45) and, without doubt, even more now than at first. She had to hear and understand from strangers the meaning of the events she was living. Before she conceived, she had a messenger from God. After the annunciation, when her mission was already begun, she received the message from men. She was evangelized by God before she became the mother of God. Now, she was evangelized by some shepherds. She belonged to the family of God but she did not experience the same closeness to him as before.

The shepherds returned to their work praising God. They were converted by what they had heard and seen. They became adorers and witnesses (Lk 2,20). They were already like angels of God (Lk 2,13). They had been evangelized by what they had seen and heard. They were now given a task which led to God being glorified. God fulfils his promise and allows his salvation to be seen by those who believe and obey. The shepherds returned to the night and to anonymity in their work of keeping watch, but their experience and their testimony were not lost. They live on in Mary's heart and will live forever in the Christian community.

II. Meditate: apply what the text says to life

The gospel records two different events in which Mary's motherhood reveals two truths about her son Jesus. The shepherds found the Messiah when they found Mary, even though the child was lying in a manger. The lowliness of the place was no obstacle to finding the child, if Mary was present. Simple attentive people like the shepherds are not shocked at seeing the Saviour in a place like that and in such company. To discover a God who is so human and powerless, we have to see things with the heart and interpret events with faith. For Mary to become the mother of God, she had to make a long uninterrupted journey of obedience to God. There is no other way to come to God. The gospel makes it very clear. When the child was laid in the manger, Mary heard from strangers what the angels said about him, and the shepherds went back home glorifying God. Then Mary remained amazed at what had happened, and she pondered everything in her heart. Like every believer, Mary had to accept in her heart what she had seen in her newborn son, the newborn son of God. Mary, this holy woman who had carried God in her womb, was to become a silent witness, listening attentively, to the God she had conceived in flesh and bone. Her daily contact with God to whom she had given life made her, without any doubt, an expert on God, and yet she had to contemplate him in daily life.

She knew she was to be the mother of the Lord. It must have seemed strange to her that the birth of God should pass almost unobserved. Her conception of God was a huge surprise, but his birth – totally unexpected by the world – must have proved a great disappointment to her. How could it be that nobody was expecting the Saviour? That great joy was granted only to a few shepherds, who happened to be keeping watch that night.

Before she became mother of God, Mary received the message of an angel. Afterwards, she received a message from some shepherds. At that time, shepherds were considered not very trustworthy, but they were the people chosen to receive the Good News, while the rest of the world was asleep. The first to be evangelized are always people who know that they are poor in the eyes of God and of the world, people who are helpless and without resources, other than what God provides. Such were the men chosen to confirm to the Mother of God that all that was happening had been foreseen by God.

It is no surprise, then, that Mary, with God in her arms, finds it hard to understand what was happening around her. We must never forget that Mary kept all these things and meditated on them in her heart. Before the mystery of God, a God born in poverty, a God who is closest to simple people, a God who is to be found wherever Mary is, we have no choice but to adopt the same attitude as his mother – to look with love on all that happens and to preserve it in our hearts. Before a God who comes as a little baby, announced by people we do not know or do not consider important, there can be no other reaction than that of Mary – to bow down in silence before the greatness of God who became so small, and to let him speak to our hearts. A God we do not understand may seem insignificant and of no help to us, if we do not have the courage to contemplate him. We find it hard to understand this God who made himself small and ordinary for us. Mary's way of being with God is to look at him with love and attention.

We cannot offer God a body, as Mary did, but we can at least look upon him and adore him in our hearts. It is in our hearts that God is born. If we look at what is happening in our lives and around us, however trivial or insignificant it may be, with the same attitude that Mary had, we will soon discover God. We will meet him with Mary, as the shepherds did. We cannot give God life and blood, as Mary did, but we can look at him and adore him in our hearts, and so carry him within us.

We should marvel, as Mary did, at the fact that the first to hear the news of the birth of Jesus and the first to proclaim it were shepherds. God chose people that he found watching during the night to be messengers of joy and heralds of the birth of his Son. It was to them he entrusted his message, and the task of identifying God. They were the ones who heard the angels' song. God's glory in heaven and peace among men on earth were assured in that newborn child. These poor people, who had little or nothing to lose, were able to put all their trust in this incredible God: "Let us go, then, to Bethlehem" they said, "to see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us." They did not regret it, for they found Mary and the child.

Only simple people can recognize God in a little child lying in a manger, without losing their faith. When they saw this God who had made himself insignificant, they became evangelizers – bearers of the good news – to Mary. Only the poor can recognize the presence of God on earth in the poverty of a manger and the loneliness of parents who have no home. Finding God in a newborn child is possible only for virgin mothers and watchful

shepherds, in other words, people who are aware of their own poverty and incapacity, and are not shocked at a God so small and insignificant. It requires great faith not to be ashamed of a God who comes as a child lying in a manger. Have we got this Marian faith which does not understand but holds everything in the heart? Have we got something of the trust of the poor shepherds who kept watch while others slept, in order to see the God who was born into our world? The shepherds revealed what they had been told. They were the first to be evangelized and they became the first evangelizers. They proclaimed what they had heard, and all who hear them were amazed and praised God. They passed from fear to faith, from hearing the message of the angel to becoming witnesses. Here we see a complete journey of faith. It will be our faith journey for the year ahead. Maybe, like the shepherds, we are already close to the finishing line – God has made himself accessible to us in our littleness, together with Mary his mother. The true believer, precisely because he is poor, is obedient and does all that he is told to do, and readily gives praise to the Lord. Anyone who has even once discovered God in Mary's womb, learns to pray, always grateful and happy to have found God as a little child.

It is through obedience that we, like the shepherds, will find Jesus with Mary his mother. The obedient are not upset at seeing God in a manger, a God who is poor and powerless, like the poor themselves. The God that Mary bore, and who is found with Mary, is a small God. The great joy of all who trust God is to find Mary and, with her, a God who has become little like us.

At the beginning of the year, let us ask Mary to become our teacher this year. May we see with the eyes of the heart what we cannot reach with normal vision or the light of reason. May we arrive at the heart of things, where God the Father is hidden, and may we preserve his teaching faithfully in our hearts.