

Wondering about Christmas

JOSEPH

I wonder....

I wonder if Joseph ever doubted; or, at least, questioned what was happening to him. There would be more people ready to assist his doubting, than to confirm his faith. His own family...and Mary's for a start. They too would feel the shame of an unexplained pregnancy. It is unlikely that they would wholly believe Joseph's explanation anymore than he himself found it easy to accept Mary's story at first. Apart from that he had to face his customers, friends and fellow craftsmen, in a town too small to hide gossip. Then there were his own fears. They lived in a garrison town. Was Mary being entirely honest with him? And if Mary's fantastic story was true. What was his place in? Would he always feel shut-out of part of Mary's life. What sort of God would ask this of him? Mary had told him so reverently of how she received an angel message saying God has chosen her to be the mother of His son; but was it real or just a dream like his? Did angels really appear? Could you really trust dreams? Joseph knew Mary to be such a pure, gentle, perceptive person, so alive, so full of love for God, but to be the most special person in God's sight?.... his Mary!

I wonder if the doubts persisted? Why should it be now that the Caesar's planned a census? It could not have been more inappropriate? Where was God to let the count take place just then? It meant a ninety mile journey to Bethlehem and they would be there just about the time the baby was due.? And again, as they frantically searched for accommodation, only to find every door shut against them, I can imagine Joseph wrestling with his own thoughts. 'Where is God when we really need him?' If this son were so wonderful why let him be born in a stable?

Later, in the few hours of quiet before dawn, I can hear him nagging himself with the questions. 'Had those shepherds really seen an angel choir? Wine was flowing so freely in town that night that far wiser men were seeing unusual things! But then, the shepherds knew exactly where to find the child - they said it was shown them by an angel. But again, an excited innkeeper's wife would have told so many about her night's work as midwife. News like that travelled fast.

The later arrival of astrologers who knew the ancient records and the movements of the stars, would have given Joseph some assurance. Sort-lived comfort though. Within hours the little family become refugees from Herod, and the questions come flooding back. 'What is God doing? How can we speak of a child who is the Messiah King, while God allows his life to be in jeopardy?

I am sure Joseph had his doubts. But they did not deter him from following God's strange purposes. You see, Joseph had the one true antidote for doubt - love!

I think of Joseph as a big man - a gentle giant. He must have been a strong man - carpenters often had to fell their own timber. I can imagine him having muscular arms and enormous hands. I see the ease with which he lifted Mary from the mule, and I see the gentleness with which he holds the baby in his hands, softly gazing through joyful tears. This strong descendant of Israel's greatest king; this high principled man, so devoted to his God; so regular at worship, had one desire - to be faithful - to God - to Mary - to the child. But at what cost! How can he keep faith with a law which demands he openly accuse and disgrace the one he loves? That was asking too much. This kindly, gracious man would find another way, a gentle way, a quiet annulling of their promises. And so his love-born faith, fuelled by patience and by prayer, was rewarded by the intervention of an angel in his dreams.

Mary and Joseph's love for each other deepened as the days passed. Welded by the secret they alone could share, they learned to trust each other more. How long the three months must have been for Joseph while Mary was in Judaea with cousin Elizabeth. How he must have railed against the emperor, not so much as a Jew against Rome, but as a lover anxious for the danger it imposed upon Mary.

How meticulously this master-craftsman would have prepared for their journey. It would be ten days at least, travelling the roads by day, sharing accommodation in the way-side inns at night. How anxious he would be in Bethlehem; searching for a room; and the indignity of a stable - for his Mary - for God's chosen mother! But responding to Mary's quiet resignation which so endeared her to him, Joseph accepted these things. In many simple, practical kindnesses and duties Joseph told Mary of his love - the love which was far greater than all his doubts and questions,

I wonder if Joseph doubted?

I am sure this big man possessed a love far greater than his frame which withstood the doubts along that undulating path of God's strange but wise

leading. From this man, who taught his sons the careful skills of carpentry, Jesus learned the master-craft of love. He drew from Joseph that gift which complemented the nature of his true Father - who is love, and taught the world that what matters first is not to understand God, but to love him.

MARY

I wonder....

I wonder what dread fears took hold of Mary in Nazareth and Bethlehem ? I wonder how often she clung to the first spoken words of her angel visitor - " Don't be afraid !" - and how often in her heart she repeated her first response - "I am the Lord's servant. I place myself in the hands of God."

What an amazing child she was. Yes, 'child', for she would be still in her teens when all this happened. Just a girl - a village girl - chosen by God to be the mother of his Son! We are touched by the simple innocence of Mary in those early years. I picture the dread in her dark eyes, the awesome, incredulity, the fear of the unknown, the dread of responsibility too heavy for her shoulders. Surely she knew what it was to be afraid.

Fears crossed her path like the flickering shadows of a showery day in summer. I sense her fear concerning Joseph; afraid to lose his love; afraid of how he would re-act; afraid that God may come between them!

I wonder...was it fear of gossip which drove her to spend three months with Elizabeth, her older cousin in Judaea? It was safe there. As they openly shared their news, Mary's act of belief became a living faith in God Together they surrendered to their God and to his gracious will, confirming each others joy and faith.

I wonder about the long trek from Nazareth - south through the Jordan valley to avoid Samaria, then turning west towards Jerusalem. It was a tiring journey for a young woman in her first pregnancy. It was probably Mary's first visit to the City. What apprehension she must have known as she realised how close they were to Bethlehem - how close to giving birth - for God ! I wonder... was she afraid as they went from house to house seeking lodging; as she watched Joseph assist the cleaning of the stable; as they waited for the midwife required by Jewish law; as she, a young girl, knew the pains of childbirth for the first time.

So many fears. Even when excited shepherds crowded into the stable telling their tale of angels. It is said that Mary thought deeply about the shepherds' words Surely, fear lurked among those thoughts and caused her to cradle her first-born closer in her arms.

Her fears were not dispelled when courtly travellers arrived bringing gifts. She may have even feared the gifts - for they were treasures beyond the touch of many Galilean women

We are told that when Mary and Joseph took Jesus to Jerusalem for the purification ceremony, old Simeon, waiting for them in the Temple, blessed the child and spoke of his future work and glory. The old man prophesied the future sorrow that would break Mary's heart. I sense the fearful shudder passing through her then. But sorrow was nearer than they thought. Herod's anger drove them further West along the route to refuge in Egypt

I am sure Mary suffered many fears. And yet at every turn of the road to Christ's nativity I imagine I hear her warding off each new rising fear with her words - "I am the Lord's servant. Let it happen to me as he says"

I wonder, - had the angel's first word of comfort planted a lasting courage in Mary's heart? It was the courage she gave to her first son. From his birth until his dying moments she would whisper to him - "Don't be afraid" Maybe that's why through all his life and work, Jesus knew how to surrender himself to God's will. With confidence, he could say to his friends. 'Don't be afraid. It's me. Immanuel - God is with me and I am with you."

At the most fearful moment of Jesus' life - in the garden of Gethsemane he could still say, "Not my will, but yours, Father." And when his work on earth was done he came to his friends with the same words - "Don't be afraid. Follow me. I am with you always."

Mary's answer to her fears is echoed still by all who surrender their life to God and follow in the way of Jesus.

IMMANUEL - GOD IS WITH US

How can it be ?
God in me !
My own Immanuel !

How often, in those waiting days,
This awesome thought in Mary's mind -
surrendered to God's wiser ways
Revealed in dreams and angel's words -
Brought pain and joy, all intertwined
As God's own Son within her stirred.

How can it be ?
God in me !
My own Immanuel !

To her, the mighty, living Lord
Was he who toppled kings from thrones,
Who rules the nations of the world;
And yet, who singles out the poor
Whose every weakest cry he owns,
And lays his heart at Mary's door.

How can it be ?
God in me !
My own Immanuel !

And not to Mary's womb alone.
The mighty God, who made the earth,
Through her, has made his world his home.
In those, like Mary, who obey,
God comes to give the world new birth
Till every living soul can say,

How can it be ?
God in me !
The world's Immanuel !

I, even I, can come alive;
God's Christ, by love, can be within
My life - my spirit to revive,
If I will be a lowly place
Where he may reign as Lord, and King.
Then I will wonder at his grace...

How can it be ?
God in me !
My own Immanuel !

VISITORS FROM THE EAST

I wonder....

I wonder who they really were...those men who came to worship Jesus after his birth? Centuries of fables have hidden the fact that we know very little about them. How many were there ? Were they kings ? Were they astrologers ? How did they come ? Why did they come ?

The most likely explanation is that they were priests who came from Persia. Wealthy aristocrats, they would have been revered among their own people as the interpreters of dreams and movements of the stars; as wise and holy people whose minds were tuned to hear the messages from the gods.

I wonder then, why they came to worship? The signs in the sky - especially a new star - together with their study of the scriptures, led them to understand the ways of the one true God to which his own people were so blind.

I wonder....was their coming from the gentile world a sign for all time that Christ is King of all the earth, that he is the fulfilment of all faith; the goal of everyone's search for God?

I wonder most about their gifts. What became of them? Did Jesus use them? How? ...And where? ...And when?

It was said they gave gold as a sign of royalty. But what use had Jesus for gold ? He saw material wealth as being of such little significance.. in fact he said it could be a hindrance to our entering into the experience of life in his kingdom.

The frankincense signified Christ's role as priest.. the one who mediates and reconciles people to their God. The myrrh spoke of suffering and of healing - the suffering of God, of holy love which in Jesus would bring healing of the body, mind and spirit - holy love which hurts and rejoices all at the same time.

And then I wonder.... Were those gifts really given as a sign of what Jesus would become... or as a token of what these men offered Jesus? A gift may be to fulfil both the giver's and the recipient's needs. If these men came as representatives of the world at the court of the King of kings....was one a king...and one a priest.... and one a doctor of medicine, offering to Christ their kingship, their priesthood, their healing gifts and all the pain and joy which went with them?

I wonder this, because from everyone who follows him and acknowledges him as king, Jesus asks the gift of what means most to us. He asks that we offer to him the gifts God gave to us, that he can use them in us to build his kingdom of love in the hearts and lives of all people.

He asks those gifts from me, from you, from all who travel the short journey of faith to him who made the long journey to meet us just where we are.

THE SHEPHERDS

I wonder....

I wonder that happened to the Bethlehem shepherds? In the familiar Bible story of Jesus' birth, we hear of them returning to the hills and to their sheep. Singing praises to God they disappear into the night and into the untold stories of everyday life.

I wonder why Jesus did not call a shepherd to be among his close companions, the disciples ? After all, the shepherd was a familiar image of God. Jesus told a story of a shepherd and his lost sheep to show the Father's self-giving and self-less love for all who are lost from him. The caring, loving, patient, enduring, sacrificing life of the shepherds whose life-style required them to hold very loosely to possessions, is the way of Christ - the way of true discipleship. Jesus called fishermen and tax-collectors....Why not shepherds? Most likely because fish can look after themselves whereas sheep need a shepherd. Taxes can wait till tomorrow, but sheep need constant attention and care. It would not be easy to leave the flock.

But what of that night in Bethlehem ? I wonder what they sang? The shepherd psalms perhaps. Or maybe songs they had recently heard from angels - haunting tunes of praise, not easily dispelled from their thoughts.

I wonder what other people thought who may have met them? Anyone meeting them on the road could be forgiven for thinking them intoxicated. 'No! we are sober,' they would reply. 'We've seen angels - millions of them - the whole sky was alight with them. They were singing - beautiful, heavenly songs of praise. One of the angels told us about the king - the Christ. He's been born in a stable in Bethlehem. We went so see, and it's true!' And so their story would unfold - to the growing amusement of their hearers.

'Where are the angels now?' they would ask, openly laughing at the tale. 'No. Honestly. We saw them. We saw and heard angels.' The enquirers stay no longer, but make their way past the shepherds, cautiously, supposing that if strong drink had not turned their minds, it must be the result of too many night alone with the sheep.

"But it is true!" one shepherd calls after them. Another says thoughtfully, 'We will never convince them.' And yet another replies, 'I'm even wondering myself if we really did see angels. But we saw the baby, just as they said, and other people know he's been born in the stable.' 'But others didn't see angels,' his companion reminded him. 'But we did !' exclaims the oldest among them, 'And we heard them. I shall never forget those songs as long as I live... no more than I can forget the beauty of that mother's face. I've been close to heaven tonight... I'm going to be different from now on. You can't be that close to heaven and stay the same. I feel ashamed somehow. I feel I never want to do an unkind thing, or say a wrong word again. I want to hold on to the fear, and the joy and peace we've known tonight. It may take a while, but I'm going to be different. People may not believe our words, but they won't be able to argue with what it's done in my life.'

THE INNKEEPER

I wonder.....

I wonder if the innkeeper at Bethlehem ever regretted giving Mary and Joseph a stable?.....ever wished he had cleared the guests from his best room, or even offered his own?

We often think of the innkeeper as an unkind, unfeeling man, caught up in the rush and having a desire to make as much out of the census as he could. Perhaps he was not like that at all. We know so little about him, we dare not judge him. Maybe, that night, rushed off his feet attending to the needs of foreign guests as well as disgruntled locals, his 'Sorry, we are full up !' was said yet once again with hardly a glance at the couple in the yard.

Perhaps it was his wife who took more notice; who saw the tired and desperate look on the girl's face; who noticed Mary's condition, and pleaded the innkeeper's help?

'But we've no more room,' he would have called over his shoulder as he turned away. 'I've already packed them in as tight as I can. You'll want me to turn the beasts out of their stalls next !'

'That's it!' she would have exclaimed. 'I can clean up the stable. We can get my sister to come as midwife.' And so it happened. Mary and Joseph found a quiet shelter in the small, earth-floored cave behind the inn. Hidden from human view by the heavy wooden door, yet open to the gaze of heaven's hosts, Jesus took his first breath in his world.

I wonder... if the innkeeper, or his wife, kept in touch with the family when they moved into a local house, after the worst of the census crowd had gone. It would not have been for long. Soon they were running for their lives before the jealous anger of king Herod. Young children died in Bethlehem. I wonder, did the innkeeper have infants of his own ? Did he and his wife suffer great loss after giving such kindness ?

I wonder if the innkeeper, in some strange way, met up with Jesus, in the later years of his ministry? It could have been on a festival visit to Jerusalem. It may have been that he discovered the significance of his stable thirty years before in Bethlehem. The child born in his stable was now a popular Rabbi whom some believed to be the Christ, the son of God. And if he had believed, I imagine him explaining his deep regret.... 'Master. If I had known. You would have had the best room in the house!'

And if it was like that, I can hear Jesus reply, 'No, my friend. It had to be that way. The world needs God in a stable. It is in the meanest places you will find him. It is in lowly hearts my Father does his work and shares his glory.

JOHN

I wonder.....

I wonder is John ever asked Mary about the birth of Jesus?

At the Cross Jesus had commended Mary and John into each other's care as mother and son. Surely they spent a lot of time together and talked much about Jesus, comforted by thinking through his peaceful early days in Galilee. I can imagine John saying, 'Tell me about his early years - the time before I knew him. Tell me about his birth and about Bethlehem.'

Yet, I wonder why John in his story of Jesus remains silent about the events of Nazareth and Bethlehem. Perhaps John knew how those stories could be distorted and confused until miracles themselves would be worshipped, rather than the God who gave them. Perhaps, for the same reason Mary was reluctant to speak much about the early days. They were a secret between God and her that few others would understand.

By the time John wrote his story he was more concerned with what Jesus' nativity meant for the world. He knew the truth was not in recorded stories but in the living witness of experience. The Jesus-life was not a story told for pleasure. It was a factual experience to be lived. John, I believe, wanted above all else that people everywhere should know that Jesus is God's Son, and find eternal life by believing in him - by letting him become a real and living person in their lives - the person being God! So John says - the Word - the whole nature of God - all truth - came into the world - we saw it, we heard it, we touched it - we met and lived with Jesus. He is the living God - the creator - who for a while came to be with us - we saw God !

I wonder if John did probe the stories of Jesus' birth? He would have had many questions. I am sure he would have asked about the light. John was intrigued by light and its properties. I imagine him earnestly asking Mary.. 'Tell me about the glory light... about the radiance of the angel choir the shepherds saw....tell me about your angel - was he in a pool of light....tell me about the star which shone so brightly....did you see it?

And so I wonder if those things were in John's mind when he set down his story and beganThe Word - God - became a human being - gave life to people..and the experience of living with him was like being in a great brightness of love and truth....like going out from the darkness into the dazzling light of day.

"To know that life," John may have said, "is a far more wonderful thing than simply listening to the story of his birth. It's a question of believing in Jesus, the Son of God, our Saviour - and YOU being born again with his Spirit in you.