

Mary Pondered

A Sermon by Stephen D. Cole

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“Mary kept all these sayings, pondering them in her heart.” (Luke 2:19)

The drama of childbirth is often followed by a lull, a time of peace, a time of rest. The drama of the Lord’s birth may have been prolonged somewhat by the visit of the shepherds, who were excited and enthusiastic about the amazing news that the angels had brought. But even still the time for rest and contemplation did follow.

Compare the reaction of Mary to that of the shepherds as the story unfolds in Luke:

Of the shepherds we read:

And it came to pass, as the angels went away from them into heaven, the men, the shepherds, said one to another, Let us now go even to Bethlehem, and see this saying that has come to pass, which the Lord has made known to us. And they came in haste, and found Mary and Joseph, and the Babe lying in the manger. And when they had seen, they made known abroad the saying which was spoken to them concerning this little Child. And all who heard marveled at those things which were spoken to them by the shepherds.

Then one short verse about Mary:

But Mary kept all these sayings, pondering them in her heart.

And finally one last verse about the shepherds:

And the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all that they had heard and seen, as it was spoken to them.

The shepherds speak earnestly to one another, they come in haste, they make known abroad, to the wonderment of all who hear. They glorify and praise God. Mary, by contrast, keeps to herself and ponders. Both are legitimate reactions to the birth of the Savior. Understanding that the birth of the Lord into the world meant liberation for those in spiritual bondage is cause for celebration, for glorifying and praising God. But what does it really mean? How does it work? When will it actually happen? One must also stop to ponder all these things. So today let us focus on the reaction of Mary.

And let us also note that while we can contrast Mary’s reaction with that of the shepherds, we can also contrast it with Joseph’s response. Joseph is another important figure in the story, but, perhaps remarkably, the Gospels record not a word spoken by Joseph. Joseph, for the most part is a man of action. He hears and he acts. It is true that he “thinks,” or considers, or ponders, when he learns that Mary is with child, but even while he is thinking about this an angel comes in a dream to tell him what he is to do. He does not question this, he awakes, he arises, and takes Mary as his wife, and calls the name of the child “Jesus.”

Again, when he is warned of the threat posed by Herod, he arises and takes the young child and His mother and flees by night to Egypt. And, finally, when that danger had passed, he receives the instruction, again in a dream, to return to the land of Israel. And yet again, he arises and takes the young child and His mother back to that land.

Mary, on the other hand, not only speaks, but she asks questions. She is humble, she is affirmative, but she wants explanations. “How shall this be, seeing that I know not a man?” she inquires at the annunciation (Luke 1:34). And in the next chapter, when the young Jesus remains behind in Jerusalem, she wonders “Child, why hast Thou done this to us?” (Luke 2:48)

In our text we read of Mary “pondering.” The word “ponder” can mean simply to consider or reflect. But it can also imply “a careful weighing of a problem or, often, prolonged inconclusive thinking about a matter.” (Merriam-Webster.com) Was Mary’s pondering inconclusive? Is “pondering” even the right English word for what is said in the original language?

The verb used in the Greek of the New Testament is “symbollo,” from which we get our English word “symbol.” The Greek is a compound from “ballo,” which mean to “throw,” and a prefix “sym-,” meaning “together.” So, taken as a whole, it means, loosely, “thrown together,” which might suggest a casual or haphazard connection. But what is not apparent from this dissection, is that, as the meaning of the word evolved, it came to suggest that the things “thrown together” have or need some connection to each other. Indeed, for the ancient Greeks, a “symbolon” was one half of an uncompleted whole. A bond between two people could be represented by a token, broken in two, each of the parties taking a piece – each of the pieces becoming a symbolon.

But what, if anything, might this have to do with Mary’s pondering? The English verb “to ponder” comes from the concept of weighing. Although one sometimes can “weigh” a single idea in one’s mind, the classic image of balances suggests the weighing of one thing against another. So “pondering” may be a good choice for describing the “symbolousa” of Mary’s mind. For her contemplation was not simply concerning one, simple, solitary fact. She had to consider separate and disparate elements. From the moment of the annunciation, she had to bring together the idea of child born of a human mother with that of a child who would be the “Son of God.” This was not simply a fact to accept, it was a seeming paradox.

When the angel Gabriel first appeared, Mary was disturbed or troubled, and it is said that she “cast in her mind” or “reasoned within herself.” But, again, it is interesting to look at the Greek used – this time the root from which we get “dialog.” So, in this case, Mary’s consideration was, as it were, an inner conversation, back and forth.

And after the Lord had been born, she heard the testimony of the shepherds, who themselves had now had an angelic vision proclaiming the miracle of the Lord’s birth. Many marveled at what they heard from the shepherds. But Mary kept all these things and pondered them in her heart. What was she weighing? What was she comparing? What was she contrasting in her mind? On the one hand, there were these miraculous events surrounding the Lord’s conception and birth. But on the other hand, as we are told in *True Christian Religion*:

“Since, then, it was God who descended, and since ... He is Order itself, it was necessary, if He was to become man actually, that He should be conceived, carried in the womb, born, educated, acquire knowledges gradually, and thereby be introduced into intelligence and wisdom. In respect to His Human He was, for this reason, an infant like other infants, a boy like other boys, and so on; with the sole difference that this development was accomplished in Him more quickly, more fully, and more perfectly than in others.” (TCR 89)

So, in one part of her mind, Mary knew that the Lord was exceptional – He was the Son of God and the embodiment of holiness. But in another part of her mind, she could not but see him

as a child like other children, a child whom she cared for every day, and who may have seemed unexceptional much of the time.

This contrast is brought to the fore in the one episode from the Lord's childhood actually recorded in the Gospels. When Mary questioned Him after He stayed behind in Jerusalem she seems to show that side of her mind that had fallen into thinking of Him as an ordinary child. But His actual behavior and His reply reasserted His unique character. And it is again said of Mary that she kept these things in her heart.

The last time that Mary's words are recorded in the Gospels comes at the beginning of the Lord's public ministry. When the wine runs out at the marriage in Cana, Mary appeals to the Lord's miraculous powers, now clearly manifesting her assurance as to His exceptional Divine power.

For thirty years, Mary balanced in her mind the two notions: the Lord as a human being such as other human beings, and the Lord as the incarnation of infinite Divine power. Mary did not doubt, but she questioned, she had internal dialog, she tried to fit the pieces together.

Mary was affirmative from the beginning of the story – She did not reject what she heard and experienced, but neither did she accept blindly. She rather went through a lengthy process of balancing conflicting thoughts and paradoxical challenges, gradually finding ways to reconcile them. And it is important to remember that for Mary this was not simply a cold and objective process of reasoning. Mary kept, preserved, and treasured these things in her heart. And her pondering was inspired by her love for the Lord and her desire to learn and carry out His will.

After the celebration of the miracle of the birth of the Lord into the world, we, too, can try to reconcile these apparently conflicting notions. From our vantage point this may seem easier. Looking back at the accounts of the Lord's life, we can focus on His miracles and His words of authority. We are not faced with daily encounters with a man who may not seem so different from others.

And yet, our lesson from the *Apocalypse Revealed* describes different ways about thinking of God, ways in which people are still apparently think at this day. Thinking of God in a material way is thinking of God solely in terms of person – and this is compared to thinking of one's neighbor only in terms of appearance and not in terms of character. Thinking of one's neighbor or of God in a spiritual way is to think in terms of character or quality. But, on the other hand, it is not possible to think of others entirely apart from appearance.

The other example mentioned is thought about heaven. If one thinks of heaven solely in terms of a place one might go, one thinks materially and fails to grasp to true nature of heaven. If, however, one tries to conceive of heaven entirely apart from the idea of a place, the concept dissolves as pure abstraction.

The goal, in thinking of the Lord or of the neighbor is to find a way to balance the concrete with the abstract, to appreciate the character or quality of each as the essential reality, but to see that essential reality embodied and reflected in the outward form. Striking this balance is not achieved in a moment but rather is a process that takes time, a process of pondering, of weighing the one against the other, a process of fitting the matching pieces together into a unified picture.

And if we remember that the Lord was also the Word made flesh, perhaps we will find a parallel tension in our own reactions to the written Word. Indeed, the Heavenly Doctrine itself

points out how easy it is to regard the Word as a book like other books, perhaps not even as well written as many. There are certainly stirring passages and moving stories, but much of Scripture can seem uninspiring and prosaic. Indeed, here may be passages that strike us, even when the spiritual sense is understood, as being harsh or unkind. So let us continue to ponder the mysteries of the Word, not in hope of some final resolution, after which we have no further questions, but rather with a continually unfolding sense of wonder.

There may be times, such as the Christmas season, when we celebrate the Coming of the Lord, when we rejoice in His salvation, when we glorify God as did the shepherds. There may be times when we hear what the Lord is asking us, or telling us in the Word what we should do, and we can simply put that into practice and act as Joseph did. But it is also essential to our spiritual progress that we take time to ponder, to meditate, and to reflect – first as to what a miraculous thing the Lord did for us and the whole human race by coming into the world, uniting the apparently contradictory Human and Divine natures in Himself. But also, as an ongoing process, attempting to fit together the pieces in our own minds and lives to realize the promise implicit in the Lord's Advent.

Amen.

Luke 2:8 And there were in the same country shepherds, abiding in the field, and keeping watch over their flock by night. **9** And behold, the angel of the Lord stood by them, and the glory of the Lord shone round about them, and they feared with great fear.

10 And the angel said to them, Fear not; for behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy which shall be to all the people. **11** For to you is born this day a Savior, who is Christ the Lord, in the city of David.

12 And this shall be the sign to you: you shall find the Babe wrapped in swaddling-clothes, lying in a manger.

13 And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying,

14 Glory in the highest to God, and on earth peace, good will among men.

15 And it came to pass, as the angels went away from them into heaven, the men, the shepherds, said one to another, Let us now go even to Bethlehem, and see this saying that has come to pass, which the Lord has made known to us.

16 And they came in haste, and found Mary and Joseph, and the Babe lying in the manger.

17 And when they had seen, they made known abroad the saying which was spoken to them concerning this little Child. **18** And all who heard marveled at those things which were spoken to them by the shepherds.

19 But Mary kept all these sayings, pondering them in her heart.

20 And the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all that they had heard and seen, as it was spoken to them.

Apocalypse Revealed 611. The boys asked, "What does it mean to meditate on the Word spiritually or materially?"

And the teacher replied, "I will illustrate the difference by examples. Who, when he reads the Word, does not think about God, the neighbor, and heaven? Everyone who thinks about God solely in terms of His person and not in terms of His essence, thinks materially. Everyone who thinks about the neighbor in terms of his appearance and not in terms of his character, thinks materially. And everyone who thinks about heaven solely in terms of a place, and not in terms of the love and wisdom of which heaven consists, also thinks materially."

Spiritual Experiences 2593. Nothing can be learned without reflection:

When reflection is absent, nothing comes into the memory, as is quite obvious. Even if the human sight is surrounded by thousands and thousands of objects, one nevertheless retains none of them in the memory on which one had not bestowed outward reflection. Likewise, when people are thinking something on which they had reflected, this they retain in the memory. In short, without reflection nothing resides in a person.