

Advent Reflections 2022 - Treasuring the Questions

Part 3: Doubts

Joseph doesn't get a lot of airtime in the story of the nativity. He tends to be there in the background, while the spotlight rests on Mary, or the Christ Child, or visitors who are encountering Jesus for the first time. But when I come to think about Joseph, and how he experienced these events, I feel like I'm with someone who is wrestling with some really tough questions.

Perhaps Joseph had hopes, had plans, for a life, a family. But suddenly, the woman he planned to marry is telling him she is pregnant, she's talking about angels, and what does he believe? What does he do? It feels like everything has been set in motion before he even knew about it, and the rug is pulled from under his feet. Perhaps he's asking the kinds of questions we might ask in these kinds of circumstances - questions which come from a deep and heartfelt place: what is happening? Why is this happening? I thought God was looking after me, but where is God now?

This is the kind of situation Thomas Merton might have been talking about when he said that this is where many holy people go to pieces. When faith no longer feels reassuring, or comforting. When it's no longer a childlike faith, but has to deal with the realities and burdens and complexities of mature life.

And yet, when we are in the darkness, our instinct is to cry out to God. Even if we feel that God is absent, we cry out to the one who we think might have abandoned us. Ruth Burrows calls this "the paradox of faith being put to the test". "On the one hand, the sufferers believe they have been abandoned by God; but on the other hand, it is to this very God they turn when all human help has failed. Their lonely hearts reach out in the darkness for God's secret presence. The heart has a deeper wisdom than the head."

So I'd like to invite you to come, now, into a place of stillness. Take a few minutes to feel grounded, to feel the floor under your feet, the chair you are sitting in. To listen to the physical self, and hear what the body might be saying about how we are, whether we're at ease, or under pressure, or tired, or just trying not to be distracted.

Check in with how you are feeling today as you come into this time of reflection - are you relaxed, welcoming this time, or are you anxious, or weary, or preoccupied? Remember there are no right or wrong feelings, so without judging, just notice what is around for you. And know that you are invited into this place, exactly as you are.

Let yourself become aware of your breathing, the rhythm of it, without changing anything. Where do you notice the breath in your body? This is the simple and precious mechanism of existence. The essence of simply being. R S Thomas writes "There is no other sound in the darkness but the sound of a man breathing..." This is who I am, a beating heart in the presence of God.

And consider, for a moment, the God who invites us, who waits for us, looks forward to meeting with us. What is this God like, who opens the door to me, simply, as I am? In the presence of this God, can I rest, put my burdens down? Can I open my hands, open my heart, to whatever insights I might find today?

The invitation, now, is to spend a little time with Joseph, and how the story of the nativity might unfold from his point of view. We have a few verses in Matthew's gospel, but that feels more like the outline of the story - there is much more between the lines, and around the edges.

Matthew 1: 18-24

This is how the birth of Jesus the Messiah came about: his mother Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph, but before they came together, she was found to be pregnant through the Holy Spirit. Because Joseph her husband was faithful to the law, and yet did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly.

But after he had considered this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, 'Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins.'

All this took place to fulfil what the Lord had said through the prophet: 'The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel' (which means 'God with us').

When Joseph woke up, he did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took Mary home as his wife. But he did not consummate their marriage until she gave birth to a son. And he gave him the name Jesus.

Can we imagine what it must have been like for this man - a man who is "faithful to the law", a "just" man, a good man? How to do the right thing? How to even work out what would be the right thing? Suddenly, his world has been turned upside-down and he has two choices, neither of which is palatable: end the relationship with Mary, or raise a child he knows is not his?

I would encourage you to notice if you are feeling drawn to any particular part of the story, if any aspect of it is standing out for you. Joseph's struggle to do the right thing, the difficult decisions he faces. Or the way the Lord intervenes and the angel appears to him. How is God with Joseph? how is Joseph with God? Whichever part it is, you might like to spend a little bit of time with that, and let it expand out from this outline, to look at what might have happened, what might have been felt, or said.

You can pick up the story at any point, looking from Joseph's point of view. The journey to Bethlehem, the birth of the baby, the visit of the shepherds, or the Magi. What is going on for Joseph then? Let your imagination take you deeper in to whichever part of the story you feel drawn to, and don't worry if things turn out a little differently to the brief account we have in the gospel.

In a way, there were no easy answers for Joseph. Life went on. He witnessed these extraordinary events around the birth of the child. We read that Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart. I wonder what Joseph was pondering? And then, the events we think might have followed: the flight into Egypt to escape persecution by Herod, the return, at some later point, to Nazareth where he was the carpenter. And he raised this child, with all the blessings and all the challenges of raising a child, knowing in some way that this child was not his own. Perhaps there was never a package of answers which explained everything, which made everything make sense, there was only life.

Where has this version of the story taken me? Is there a point at which I identify with Joseph, and what might that lead me to explore? Can I talk to God, or to Jesus, about this?

I'm going to read another poem by R S Thomas. This is called 'In Church', and it is, literally, set in church. Here is R S Thomas, who was a clergyman, in his church after a service has finished.

Often I try
To analyse the quality
Of its silences. Is this where God hides
From my searching? I have stopped to listen,
After the few people have gone,
To the air recomposing itself
For vigil. It has waited like this
Since the stones grouped themselves about it.

These are the hard ribs
Of a body that our prayers have failed
To animate. Shadows advance
From their corners to take possession
Of the places the light held
For an hour. The bats resume
Their business. The uneasiness of the pews
Ceases. There is no other sound
In the darkness but the sound of a man
Breathing, testing his faith
On emptiness, nailing his questions
One by one to an untenanted cross.

And, while this is quite a dark poem - literally, as it talks about the shadows returning, about emptiness - notice the double meaning of that "untenanted" cross. Untenanted because Jesus is absent, or untenanted because Jesus is risen? Thomas leaves us with both possibilities. And notice that, even while he wonders if God is hiding from him, he nails his questions to that cross, with all the persistence and determination that implies.

Do I have questions I would like to nail to the cross?
What would I like to say to God, now?