

Christmas 1 2017 – St Lawrence’s 8.00 & 9.30

I’ve never been able to understand those people who like to read the final pages of a book before they’ve read the rest of it. Perhaps they just can’t wait to find out how the story will end; or maybe they want to check whether the book’s going to be worth reading. I don’t know. But I certainly wouldn’t dream of reading the final pages until I’d read all the pages that go before.

Having said that, I do enjoy reading books more than once – which means, of course, that I’ll often know just how the story will end. But if there are other good things about the book, then the story isn’t spoilt for me by knowing how things will turn out.

When we read or listen to the Christmas story, most of us know it very well; and we know that with all its twists and turns – the lack of accommodation for the holy family, the flight to Egypt, the killing of the innocents – with all its twists and turns the story does have a joyful ending. The birth at Bethlehem is the start of the story of Jesus Christ – a story which reaches its climax a few years later in the drama and the joy of Easter. Of course, for the people who were part of the first Christmas story, there was no knowing how the story would end.

There were lots of *hints* about how the story might unfold: messengers from God, prophetic sayings; shepherds reporting an angel choir singing of the birth of a *savior*; wise men talking about a *king of the Jews*. There were hints.

But there were still a lot of gaps in the picture, and plenty of ambiguity. People argued about what the signs meant; they disagreed about how to interpret the sayings of the prophets; many just didn’t notice what was going on at all. We learn in Luke’s gospel that all this ambiguity has its effect on Mary. While most are simply amazed at what’s happening, Mary is more thoughtful: ‘Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart.’

Mary had a lot of thinking to do. What did it mean to be told that she was the bearer of God’s child? What did it mean that her child would be called the Son of the Most High? What *does* it mean to be the Messiah – to be Good News to all people? These words can mean so many things. And how are you to bring up a child like this?

There’s so much that’s unclear about the way ahead for Mary and her family; so much for her to ponder in her heart.

One thing was clear – despite this divine event that had broken into the lives of the little community in Palestine, much was going to be left to the *humans* involved as they negotiated their way through the consequences of Jesus’ birth.

And that seems to be part of the way God works in his world. Much is left in the hands of human beings as God’s purposes are being worked out day by day.

Over the last few days, we’ve celebrated a familiar and much-loved story. But let’s put ourselves for a moment in the shoes of those who didn’t know how it would all work out; of those who had only their faith to help them put together the pieces of the heavenly jigsaw that was being laid out before them.

Often our own lives and the world we live in are a jumble of such pieces. We may have rare moments of clarity about where our lives are going and how things might be fitting together.

But more often we're all too conscious of questions unanswered and uncertainties to be grappled with – which means that much of life is simply about 'just getting on with it'; about taking the next step in the light of what we see to be God's *probable* will.'

Perhaps, in the end, this very ambiguity is the great privilege of being human. It's a privilege we protect by rejecting all those so-called 'fundamentalist' responses to life's questions – those responses that begin 'The Bible says ..' or 'God is telling me ...' Rather than revealing to us the end of our stories, God gives us space to allow the Christian story to unfold for each one of us.

I hope we've been reinvigorated by the story of Christmas as we've heard it retold. But it's now time for us to follow Mary's example and to ponder; to think, not just about the wonderful things that God has done, but also about the questions and the uncertainties that these things bring into focus – perhaps about the way we're living our lives; about the way we relate to the world around us; or about the challenges the world is laying before us.

And, like Mary, we are able to ponder what response is asked of us. How are we to live our lives in light of the things that happened two thousand years ago in Bethlehem? What does it mean to be a person of peace and joy in our broken world?

What does it mean to put our faith in the Christ child in a world where others find a different person or a different creed to follow? What does it mean to trust in God when he seems very often to be an absent God?

We've been promised, and we believe, that, like Jesus' story, the story of God's purposes for his world is going to have a joyful ending. In the meantime we have our part to play, our chance to take part in the greatest story ever told.

So let's treasure the story we've enjoyed hearing again – and let's continue to ponder this story in our own hearts.

Guy Buckler