

Christmas

Luke's gospel is a gospel where the "heart" is central. For example, he hears, in this passage, when the shepherds had told Mary and Joseph about their child—we are told that Mary treasured all these words and pondered them *in her heart*. Later, we will hear that Mary and Joseph take their child; first, he is circumcised on the eighth day; but then, there is the Presentation in the temple. They meet Simeon. Simeon says to Mary, "This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed, so that the inner thoughts of many [literally: *thoughts of many hearts*] will be revealed—and a sword will pierce you own soul too." Right at the end of Luke's gospel, there are a couple of people on the way to Emmaus. They are accompanied by a stranger, who eventually reveals himself [as Jesus] in the breaking of bread. And they remark after this, "Didn't our *hearts* burn within us, while he opened to us the scriptures?" Also, in the book of the Acts of the Apostles, when the apostle Peter proclaimed the message of the gospel to his fellow Jews, in Jerusalem, and to the proselytes who had come to Jerusalem, we are told that the people were *cut to the heart*.

So there is an emphasis, in Luke and Acts, on the heart, as really being the focus of the work of the kingdom of God. In fact, there are various translations for this; but Jesus says, as Luke's gospel tells us, "The kingdom of God is not observed by various signs; the kingdom of God is within you [or: in your midst]." So there is the sense that the rule, the kingship, which Jesus initiates in the world, is a kingdom of the heart.

Well, this emphasis is, I would say, seen in our passage from Luke 2:1-20—not only by Mary's pondering of these things in heart, but also by the way the whole matter is presented.

If you read this passage, and tried to consider, "What were the attitudes of the early Christians to the state?" you would think that they are simply to be good citizens. They are people who do what they are told, for the most part, and acknowledge the place of worldly power. So we hear that Emperor Augustus had this registration, or taxation/enrolment/census, and Mary and Joseph came from Nazareth in Galilee, to Bethlehem in Judea to be enrolled, because Joseph was of the house and family of David. So, if we read just this passage from Luke's gospel, and much more of Luke's gospel, we would think that all early Christians simply acknowledged the value of the earthly state, and carried out their responsibilities to that end.

The scene is quite different, then, if you compare this to—for example—the deliverance of the people of Israel from Egypt. There is a very physical sort of bondage—these people in slavery, having to work in a very onerous way to build up the store cities of the Pharaoh. And the Pharaoh himself really takes the place—in his own mind—for God. In fact, when Moses comes to him and tells him about the LORD, Pharaoh says, "Well, who is the LORD, that I should pay attention to him?" So there is a quite different scene here, when we consider Luke's gospel. The Emperor Augustus has a certain status—but not too far—a status that provides earthly peace.

But is the one who is born in the manger enrolled? Does he escape this census? Or is he part of the enrolment, as well? There is a sense that the worldly power has its place. But there is something else going on here, which relates to the human heart, to the human beings as spiritual beings in relation to God.

Now, Moses had a revelation of God in the wilderness of Sinai. He saw a burning bush that was not consumed. He was also given a sign that he would eventually—along with the

Israelites—serve God on this very mountain, Mt. Sinai, where, of course, the Ten Commandments were given.

The sign is given to shepherds here, shepherds without a name; they are not named, unlike Moses, who was a shepherd in the wilderness of Sinai. These shepherds are given a message of—not that God is going to deliver his people, but—the Saviour himself is going to be born in their midst. So, unlike with Moses, we have, in this unlikely location, a child born in a manger... the birth of a Saviour, who is Christ (or Messiah), the Lord. And the angels indicate that this is glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace with those whom God favours.

So peace is what this Messiah will bring. Now, Caesar brought his own peace. But the peace that Luke wants to point out to all his readers, is peace in our relationship with God, a peace that also has ramifications in our relationships with one another. It's a peace of the heart that we share with others.

Now, we know we live in a world where there are earthly powers which are anything but kind to their citizens—we think of the government of Syria, for example—and where people feel compelled to tow the line, to think in a certain way, not to disobey the worldly authority. But this Messiah has a way of awakening people's interest. This appearance of the angels to the shepherds results in the shepherds saying, "Well, let's go see this that has been spoken to us." So they head off to Bethlehem. So this rule of the Messiah that is already having its impact results in people's interest, imagination, minds, being awakened, to something that God is bringing about.

We are also told that these same shepherds, after they come to see Jesus in the manger—they proclaim, they praise God for all that they have seen and heard. So part of the result of this kingdom of the heart is that people are given a voice. No longer are we dumb, no longer are we voiceless; we are suddenly given a way to express ourselves; and we have something to express! God come into our midst, in the person of Christ.

So all of this reaches its climax when we hear that "all who heard of these things were amazed. But Mary treasured all these words, and pondered them in heart."

The kingdom of God which Jesus has made known is a kingdom which calls for an inner transformation of our whole being—of course in such a way that we act out of that heart that God has given us. That transformation as Mary would experience it is not necessarily an easy transformation, because, as Simeon indicated to her, a "sword will pierce your own soul [or heart] also." When God calls us to faith, calls us to this transformation of the heart, it can be a difficult thing. But, ultimately, it is something that conforms us more fully to the nature of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.

So we have a message of the kingdom of God, which is addressed to our very heart, and calls for our transformation, such that we find interest in the world around us; we are given a voice and a manner of relating to others which is expressive of what God has made known to us; and we even acknowledge the good offices—sometimes—of those in positions of authority over us, recognizing that they are not God; they have no claim ultimately on our heart; but they do their own good thing too; and we can hold them in honour.

The kingdom of God is within you.