

Christmas season is short! We cram an awful lot of amazing scripture into a very few days. The feasts of Christmas, Holy Family, Epiphany, and Baptism of Jesus occur all in less than 3 weeks. We're going a mile a minute leading up to Christmas and we barely catch a breath. Today's story, so often heard that we barely hear it, is a story of a family that loses control of a child, and not just any child, but the *Christ* child. Although we hear nothing from Joseph, he must be feeling awful – to lose the Son of God on *his* watch? Do you think he may have been looking over his shoulder for that archangel, you know, the one with the flaming sword? But all is well in the end, Jesus is found, and after a terse exchange, the family is reunited and peace returns to the Holy Family. Or does it? We don't know – all we do know is that Jesus doesn't re-appear in the gospel narrative for 18 more years.

Luke's infancy narrative holds Mary front and center – she is the model of discipleship and we are encouraged to look at what she does very carefully. There's a very simple line at the end of today's gospel that I invite you to ponder with me: “He went down with them and came to Nazareth, and was obedient to them; *and his mother kept all these things in her heart.*” Mary was clearly a contemplative person – she pondered the meaning of life.

There was an article published in the San Diego Union a little over two weeks ago on the topic of loneliness. We all feel loneliness at various times in our lives – the Holiday Season is classic. But loneliness is particularly pervasive in our late 20's, our mid 50's and our late 80's, all times when we are managing life change, whether it is seeking a mate, navigating a mid-life crisis, or facing mortality. One of the surprising observations in the article was the recognition that *wisdom* and loneliness do not appear to co-exist. If you're wise, you're not lonely. What is meant by *wisdom* in this context? According to the article, the following are characteristics of wisdom: control over emotions, compassion, acceptance of uncertainty, decisiveness, spirituality, and contemplation. (they use the term self-reflection) Interesting, isn't it? Guess who had every one of these characteristics in abundance? Yes, Mary. Even though she had many moments of sorrow and challenge, I doubt she had a lonely moment in her life.

Many of us don't quite know what to make of this term “contemplation”. Is it about sitting around *thinking* all day? Or is it short bursts of quiet prayer? Many of us have tried to be contemplative, and if you're like me, the sequence goes something like this: Okay, I'm clearing my mind. I'm going

to think about Jesus. Great, it's working. I'm thinking about...oh darn, I forgot to pick up the laundry. Shoot, maybe later on today. Oh wait, back to thinking about Jesus. Hmm, I wonder if I can catch the game on ESPN tonight? And so it goes. Is this contemplation? There's not much very holy going on, it seems. So, we give up and leave it to the monks.

There's a better way to think about this. If you go to the very first psalm in the Bible, we read, "Happy are those ... who study God's law day and night. They are like a tree planted near streams of water, that yields its fruit in season; its leaves never wither; whatever they do prospers." So think about a tree growing next to a stream of water. The tree has sunk roots into the soil and you can bet that every major root is tapping into that water source. The tree is not consciously drinking water, for sure, but it is in constant contact with that water. As the leaves of the tree lose water to evaporation, the roots are the mechanism by which water transpires up to the leaf cells, keeping the tree green and lush. As the cells thrive and divide, the tree grows larger and larger, restrained only by genetics and the amount of water and nutrients available. Now consider the tree as a metaphor for a human being, and the water as the grace of God and now we're on the right track. Just as water is the primary substance that a tree needs to flourish, so too is God's grace the primary substance that we need to flourish. As the *inner life* expands through grace, so the *outer life* is necessarily affected and directed.

But wait, you might rightly ask, is it really accurate to speak of ourselves as having two selves, an inner and an outer self? Aren't we getting into some sort of schizophrenia here? Let's stop and look at this more carefully. There's a long history in religious spiritual tradition that supports this notion of an inner and outer self. It's quite biblical as well. The Jews made a distinction between soul and spirit in their cosmology, with the soul standing for the inner self. Mary's great prayer in the presence of Elizabeth, the so-called Magnificat, begins "My *soul* proclaims the greatness of the Lord; my *spirit* rejoices in God my Savior." Not only is a distinction made between soul and spirit, but a certain hierarchy is implied. Clearly soul is leading the way for the spirit. Thomas Merton, re-awakening the contemplative tradition in Catholic spirituality in the mid twentieth century, renamed the inner self the *true self*, adding a psychological component that is largely accepted by most therapists today.

So, we have an invitation to contemplate, to tap the source of grace like a tree root to water. Some find this much easier to do than others. But even if

we don't intentionally *contemplate*, we can certainly plant ourselves next to a stream of running water, next to a source of grace. The very proximity of grace is sufficient, it seems, as long as that grace revolves around Jesus, exactly as Mary models. How is this done? Celebrating the Mass as often as you can is clearly a key way to do this. Daily reception of the Eucharist is the most direct and efficacious way to tap into the stream of grace. I recently finished the autobiography of Bishop Fulton Sheen, the famous Catholic televangelist of the mid-20th Century. He often called upon good Catholics to dedicate an hour to Christ in front of the Blessed Sacrament every day. He called it the Holy Hour. He claims to have never missed a Holy Hour in his entire priesthood – every single day. I just recently read that Bishop Robert Barron does the exact same thing. Every single day. I'm sure that they were plagued with random thoughts and worries and frustrations like each of us, but somehow the simple action of doing nothing but being present to Christ was sufficient.

And more so, this practice, according to St. Paul, in turn brings forth the gifts of the Holy Spirit, paramount of which is *wisdom*. We're back full circle. Times of loneliness and depression are inevitable in every person's life, but with the pursuit of a contemplative spirit through access to Jesus, we achieve wisdom. And wisdom is the number one bulwark against a life of loneliness and fear. Mary demonstrated it every day of her life. She put Christ in the center of her inner self, her soul, her true self, and everything flowed from that core. Maybe we all can do the same?