

GOD WITH US - THINK ABOUT IT!!

Sunday after Christmas 2008

If you don't want to know the results, look away now!

When the last Harry Potter book came out, I had to shut my ears every time the story was mentioned. I wanted to read it for myself - when it came out in paperback, of course.

Are you one of those people who like to read the end of a book first, just to check out that you can be bothered to read the whole thing? Or are you one of those people who goes ballistic if someone tells you the end of the plot when you are half way through reading it.

The thing is, that with the Christmas story, we **know** the ending, whether we like it or not. It is not a story in a book, it is a narrative from history. We know it very, very well. True, not all the details are in there, and some of the pieces don't seem to tessellate properly. - history is like that - the record is never as full as we should like. But we know that with all its twists and turns, it is a real one; the anticipation of Christmas is followed by the drama the pain of crucifixion and joy of Easter. Despite all the professional doubters I, and so many other, are certain that this story is true - real people, real events, real witnesses.

But the people who took part in the first Christmas story all those years ago had no idea of the outcome. Yes, sure, there were lots of hints at things to come: messengers from God, prophetic utterances; shepherds belting down from the fields to tell wild tales of angels and a heavenly choir singing that the saviour is born. While it was all going on what must they have thought. The Meldrew approach: I just don't believe it? Simple amazement? Total confusion and puzzlement. Or, like Mary - the chief player in the Bethlehem scene - pain and pondering.

But, let's face it, there were still an awful lot of gaps in the story, even then and lots of room for misunderstanding. People still argued about what the signs

meant, or disagreed about the interpretation of the prophetic utterances, or just didn't notice what was going on at all. It wasn't cut and dried like a novel, where you could turn on and see what happened next, or turn back to double check out a detail that you might have missed. This is real time history - happening now. It may be a bit of a muddle - yet while everyone else is amazed, Mary is more thoughtful: "But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart."

What was she thinking? As she 'treasured up' all these events, what else was running round and round in her poor head. What does it mean - this Son of God title? What did it mean that he would be called the Son of the Most High? Or to inherit the throne of his ancestor David? How? What does it mean to be Good News to all people? How will Joseph cope with this - he knows the baby isn't his? Who really is the Messiah? My son - a mighty warrior? Get real! To be the Messiah? If he is really all this, then how should we bring him up? Can I smack him? Can we actually teach him anything - or will he be a know-all and make us feel useless? Should we give him up to the Temple and see what they make of him while we get on with our lives? Will he be an outlaw; or will he somehow take over from Herod in a peaceful way? Will he be hurt? Will we be hurt?

So sore - and so tired. So many questions. So few answers. No wonder it says "but Mary".

Even now there are quite a lot of "buts", quite a lot to treasure up and think about. What do we really think about this story? At the time, it became clear that although God had broken through to Mary, to Zechariah, to the Shepherd - perhaps even in the signs in the stars. Yet so much was left up to the human players on the stage. The shepherds could have gone back to sleep and put it all down to bad wine, or the cheese and pickle at supper. Mary could have said 'No'. Yes, an awful lot was to be left to the ordinary people involved. And that seems to be part of God's plan: the way that the story of salvation is woven with the story of all of us.

Over the last few weeks, we have celebrated a familiar, well-worn and much-loved story. But just try to think about those who didn't know how it would

all work out. They had only their faith to help them put together the pieces of the jumbled up heavenly jigsaw that they were trying to do. Often our own lives are a mess of such pieces – some moments of great clarity, answers to prayer, signs from God and words of instruction. But mostly muddle.

But let's face it, if your life is anything like mine, these moments of certainty are rather rare. There are always doubt, there are so many unanswered questions, so many uncertainties. And so much of faith is effort, hard work, just getting on with it. But this is a great privilege. Rather than tie everything up with spiritual certainties, God gives us the space we need to allow the Christian story to unfold for each one of us. Our faith tells us what the end of our story will be. We know we shall die - but we cannot turn to the end of our living autobiography to see when or how. It would, quite frankly, be awful if we could - well I think so anyway.

Over the past weeks and days we have heard again the story of Christmas - the same and yet different each year. We have had all the cosy dross that surrounds the hard reality of a 90 mile journey, a delivery in some cave or lean to shelter, of the constant fear of drunken Roman soldiers, of wild animals - even in Bethlehem. Let us try to see the heart of the story as it was then and is now.

God born as human baby - a little boy. Can we believe it? Do we believe it? What difference did it make - what difference does it make now? To you - to your living auto-biography. How does this change the end of your story.

Let us take time to be like Mary - to ponder over it in our hearts.