

Nativity of the Lord

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Introduction

Throughout Advent's season of watching, we have been considering the act of *looking* and thinking about our own practice in this regard. The Lucan birth narrative which forms the Gospel readings for Christmas Eve and Christmas Day allows us to reprise our questions of 'How?' 'Where?' 'What?' and 'Why?' but also to draw them all together into one final question: 'What do we *do* with the resulting *seeing*?'

Preparation

Choose one of the characters from the passage (you can use a bit of licence and also include one of the animals we typically associate with the scenes which Luke portrays or maybe someone whose presence we might infer e.g another woman helping Mary give birth)) and think about what your chosen 'viewer' might see as the events around them unfold. Then portray this using whatever medium you like: you might compose a short poem, prayer, or key word acrostic; or perhaps add a verse written from their perspective to a favourite carol. Or you could make a visual representation in any medium or style that appeals, or find some music which expresses the scenes have imagined.

Does doing this kind of imagining change the way you read the story, and if so – how?

Text

Luke 2:1– 20

In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered.

This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria.

All went to their own towns to be registered.

Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David.

He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child.

While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child.

And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.

In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night.

Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified.

But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people:

to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord.

This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger."

And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying,

Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors!"

When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us."

So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger.

When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child;

and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them.

But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart.

The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.

Comment

One of the questions we have considered in our exploration of looking is that of the *direction* of our gaze and of the need to sometimes look to the margins or to the counterintuitive places. In [Advent 2](#), Mark places his herald of ‘the beginning of the good news’ not at the seat of power but out in the wilderness – to the perplexity of the religious elite. There’s a similar dynamic here in Luke – ‘the whole [Roman] world’ of verse 1 delineates a theatre of action which, in terms of both geographical size and people involved, is vast. In contrast both Gallilee and Bethlehem – despite the designation *polis* (city) – were little more than villages. But it is here, on these insignificant stages far from the centre of Roman power, that the human and cosmically significant action is happening. We might draw a similar parallel at vv. 8–14 when the angels – beings from high in the heavenly hierarchy – appear, not to the elite and powerful in nearby Jerusalem, but to shepherds on the hillside. Moreover these hearers become, despite their lowly status, important witnesses to and spreaders of the news of the birth. Hence once again critical action occurs at the level of the seemingly small and insignificant.

At this point of the narrative, our questions of ‘Where?’ and ‘How?’ also come back into view. Like the Baptist in our [Advent 3](#) reading, the Angels are not primarily there to draw attention to themselves but to point the gaze of the lookers elsewhere. In this respect the shepherds do better than some of those who went looking for John (and indeed the disciples in our [Advent 1](#) reading!) They do not get distracted either by the spectacle of the heavenly choir itself or by their own – entirely understandable – emotional reaction to this visitation. Instead they take on board what has been said and set off to discover more. Similarly they take in what they see in the stable and join bits of the narrative together in such a way that it draws ‘all who heard it’ into the experience. Moreover their reportage becomes something which focuses Mary’s gaze in a deeper way, helping it to then become part of something which brings us back to our final question: ‘what do we *do* with our seeing?’

The second half of Luke’s narrative uses three different responsive verbs which point us towards some answers to this. These follow on from what the shepherds see and the way they convey this to others. But in fact, even before we get to these, the Shepherds have provided a first and vitally important answer: they take what they see and *act* on it – in this case by setting off for Bethlehem to see for themselves and to direct the looking of others by describing what has brought them there. And it is this action on their part which acts like a stone dropped in a pond, sending out ripples which draw in the looking of others.

Luke uses the verb *thaumaz* (to wonder or marvel) to describe this first response to their story. His text gives us the impression of a joyful noisiness around its relation and reception, something which we might reasonable assume continues as they leave the stable (maybe with others in tow who want to hear more, or gathering new listeners attracted by the buzz as they go). So a second answer to our question is to remind ourselves that there is often, if not always, an affective element to seeing which we need to recognise and acknowledge and which it is sometimes proper, useful or helpful to act on. Of course we need to be very careful here since this is obviously not necessarily about simply allowing our emotions to drive our subsequent actions – but this is where those practices of deep and collected looking which we considered in [Advent 1](#) are important. Awareness of our emotional responses, properly considered, can become part of the cycle of deeper, more developed looking. They can tell us important things about ourselves and our understandings – and the possible need to attend to these – as well as sometimes

showing us the necessity for action in response to our seeing.

The two other verbs occur in connection with Mary. The pondering (*dialogizomai*) reflective practice which we noted in Advent 4 is expanded here by Luke's use of *synt re* and *syball* and all three help us to think about a third answer to the question of what we should do with our seeing. *Synt re* – translated variously as 'kept' or 'treasured' – means to attend to carefully, to watch over. The Greek word has two constituent components which each contribute something distinctive to its implications: *t re* – meaning to attend to carefully/take care of – carries a strong sense of watching over and preserving. The addition of *syn* denotes things which are brought together by association or process*. Its use here gives an additional depth and dimension (which is somewhat lost in the English translation), bringing something of a *gestalt* feel to what Mary does with 'all these words'.

Although *syball* is also translated here as 'pondered' it has a different feel to *dialogizomai*. *Ball*, means to scatter, throw or cast into* and is the same word that is used in connection with fishing nets in Matt 4:18 and 13:47. In conjunction once again with *syn* (here transliterated *sym*) it indicates '[putting] one thing with another in considering circumstances' * We can perhaps imagine Mary here as throwing a mental net to catch all the different thoughts and sensations of her journey to this point – from annunciation and pregnancy, through the responses of Elizabeth and Joseph to the birth and the visit of the shepherds – and pulling them all together into one place so that she can look at them and see the connections between them and the patterns they form.

In both Luke 1 and 2 Mary thus models for us an important answer to our final question: what we need to do with our seeing is take it onward (either by ourselves, or in conversation with trusted others) into another cycle of looking – revolving things in our mind, weighing up possible explanations, looking at situations in an overarching way or standing back from them in order to see things as a whole, or to help us spot patterns and connections which we might have missed. All of these things will help us to deepen and enrich our understandings – of others, of ourselves, of conflicts, of things currently happening in the world. As we move from a challenging year into one which is likely to be equally testing (though perhaps for different reasons) we have a responsibility, both individually and corporately, to work at building the kind of thick, rich, textured understandings which are both the substance of the kingdom of God and also provide the complex knowledge we need to navigate the times we inhabit. Attention to, and ongoing development of, our practice of looking is a vital part of this.

Response

Revisit some of the questions about looking and seeing which you have asked yourself over the course of these reflections and try and bring them into a further cycle of reflective looking in one of the ways suggested by Mary's approach. Then consider one or more of the following questions (or any others which may occur to you as a result of this further looking).

Are there connections or patterns which you can see emerging with respect to your own practice of looking? What elements of this do you need to celebrate? Are there facets where you need to do further work?

If you are reflecting in connection with a particular situation, do you feel that your understanding is becoming more nuanced or more textured as you reflect on your own practice of looking at it?

Are there any insights from these questions about looking which you can take forward into 2021, or into a specific conflict or other situations as a way of developing and deepening the manner in which you engage with it?

Prayer

God be with us in our watching
– and may our looking be attentive and focussed.

God be with us in our looking
– and may our seeing be sharp and clear.

God be with us in our seeing
– and may our understanding be deep and rich.

God be with us in our understanding
– and may our doing be courageous and loving.

God be with us in our doing
– and may our living be generous and true.

God be with us in the year to come
– and well,
and seven times well,
may we spend ourselves in it.
Amen

Further Reading

*definition and parsings from Vine's and Thayer's expository dictionaries.