

The human mind is an astonishing, breathtaking thing, isn't it? Its ingenuity and imagination, wit and wisdom. A real phenomenon. But it's also flawed; it's not perfect. Just as we are not perfect. It makes mistakes. It's a teensy bit conceited, and self-absorbed sometimes. For example, it forgives us our faults and failings far more often than it forgives others'. I imagine that's what Jesus meant when he commanded us to love our neighbours as ourselves. We let ourselves off far more things and far more often than we ever let our neighbours off... So, although the human mind is wonderful and to be treasured and celebrated at all times, we should also take what it thinks it knows with a little pinch of salt.

Take science for example. The human mind has discovered, learned, taught us many magnificent, life changing, life-saving things over the centuries. Science's current fight against Covid being a prime example. But with that success comes a risk. The mind gets a bit caught up in its own cleverness and starts to imagine that, if it can find the answer to such-and-such, then it can – and will, at least some day – find the answer to this and that also. One day, it assures itself, it will find the answer to everything. Perhaps one day it might. Perhaps one day it might. But in the meantime, since it has found the answer to many things, it has convinced itself that unless it knows the answer to something, whatever that something is, it can't possibly be true. And that's what we get with the Christmas story, don't we? Many people with wonderful, imaginative and truly fascinating minds look at the Christmas story and say – well, science says it can't be true – so it isn't true. But those minds are being, I am afraid, just a little caught up in their own cleverness. Let's take the nativity story as found in Luke as an example.

It's a faithful record - record - of various peoples' account of what they actually witnessed in the build-up to, and during, and beyond this astonishing event. How do we know this? Well, to many peoples' surprise, theology and biblical scholarship is as much an academic, thorough and painstaking process as science is. There are clues in the text, and putting those clues together, we start to get a picture of how

accurate the nativity story is likely to be. For example, at the very start of Luke's record of the life of Christ we get this:

*'Since many have undertaken to set down an orderly account of the events that have been fulfilled among us, just as they were handed on to us by those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and servants of the word, I, too, decided after investigating everything carefully from the very first, to write an orderly account...'*

It is thought that Luke was a doctor. One of my interests is Roman Britain. And, in the academic journal *Brittannia*, some years ago, I was surprised to read of a set of instruments that had been dug up by archaeologists. They were surgical instruments and they were identified as those designed to perform brain surgery.

Whether Luke was a doctor, whether surgeons in that age were able to perform complex procedures, or not, we would do well in any case to remember that some of the greatest human thinkers, scientists and mathematicians the world has ever seen, lived and worked around the time of Jesus and for decades and centuries before. Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, Euclid...

Today's human mind, in its cleverness, has an unhelpful habit of thinking that it is only in recent years that we have become somehow wise and objective, and that anybody in the past was, well, more naïve and less well-educated; gullible; superstitious. CS Lewis calls it Chronological snobbery. On the contrary, Luke is entirely capable of conducting painstaking research into what happened at the birth of Christ. But where does he get his data from?

Well, the clue's in what he says at the outset. He mentions 'eyewitnesses' and 'servants of the word'. These latter folk were those in that culture with the specific role of remembering and recounting the facts of the matter as given them by the community to preserve. We mustn't think they made it up. They wouldn't have been allowed to. And they wouldn't have wanted to. The role of being the community archivist was a sacred one and a huge honour. But – and this is where we return

to this morning's Christmas gospel – there is at least one other source of data for Luke. And that is Mary herself. Possibly still alive at the time Luke was writing or, if not, someone who knew her well and in whom she had confided.

It's there in the Gospel: 'But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart'. The Greek expression translated here as 'treasured', a delightful and poetic word, means actually actively stored up and kept safe. And 'pondered' means spending time and energy trying to understand; comprehend things that are actually beyond our finite human mind's comprehension and experience. In fact 'pondered' is used for when the entire village gathered to try and comprehend what happened to Elizabeth – of mature years and up to that point barren – and Zechariah - rendered dumb and then restored to speech - upon the birth of their son John. And 'pondered' is used in the only story we have of Jesus as a young boy. His parents lose him, and they find him after a frantic search in the Temple, his 'father's house', as Jesus tells them. Luke tells us that Mary stores this event up and tries to think through what it means. Who else but Jesus' mother, really, would be likely to recall such a story and relate it to others? And so biblical scholarship goes on – putting these, and a formidable number of other clues, together.

So, we can perfectly reasonably accept that the nativity happened largely as Luke reported it. Yes - up to and including Virgin births, messengers from God, shepherds, bright stars and the like. And we can do so, because we realise that there are indeed things beyond what can currently be established by the limits of science. Things that can only be perceived with the eye of faith. Things that are – in that wonderful word of longstanding Church tradition – a mystery. And when we say 'the eye of faith' we don't mean blind faith. Rigid adherence to fundamentalist or dogmatic beliefs. We mean simple faith. A faith which is nonetheless as clear and objective an instrument as other ways of perceiving, or knowing, or understanding. With simple faith we can, with every confidence, accept that there are things beyond which our human minds are capable of comprehending, but which nonetheless are true. And

resting in that faith, we can give thanks and, through God's love, we can rest content in the fact and the truth that God came to live with us incarnate as Jesus the Christ, Emmanuel. Which is what we are doing here, today; this morning.

What we do with this information is for us to ponder upon.

Amen