

A Christmas Reliquary

A Meditation Delivered on Christmas Eve 2007 by

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But Mary kept all these things, pondering them in her heart.

Luke 2:19

We took the tree out of the attic last week and finally got around to decorating it. Melinda and I have been married 27 years so as you can imagine, we have some old ornaments and, because we were students when we got married, we had some cheap ornaments. Of course we also have ornaments from when our children were just born and ornaments from throughout their childhood. Some are handmade by eight year old hands. Others are symbolic of first Christmases. We have a Harry Potter ornament. I bought a White House ornament from Bill Clinton's first year in office. I even have a White House ornament from President Bush's tenure. We have a garland of red and white that Melinda crocheted years ago and for some reason, did not get up on the tree this year. But that brings me to the next point: we spent time figuring out which ornaments would be left out this year and even which decorations ought to be simply thrown away as having outlived their usefulness.

I'm not sure where you store your ornaments but ours are in a few boxes and bags. But imagine if you will a box. You can imagine it any way you like, but since it's Christmas, make it a nice box, deep box. And let's call that box a Christmas Reliquary. As we imagine that I will say this: at the conclusion of the birth narrative in the Gospel of Luke is a Christmas reliquary. For this to make sense all you need do is remember my story of how we sorted through ornaments to decorate our tree. Of course, I will speak to this idea a little further in hopes of our understanding even further what we have in this birth narrative provided by Luke.

I suppose first I should try to clarify what I mean by the word "reliquary." That is a really neat word but one that Protestants as a rule are not familiar with. Catholics, Orthodox and Eastern Christians might be more familiar with it since in their traditions, relics are important. So a reliquary is something like a box that relics are stored in. Now that relic could be a bone from an apostle; it could be a splinter from the original cross; it might be a piece of cloth. A relic is simply something that was

original to someone or something else we consider holy and we keep it in order to remind us of that person or place. That is a pretty broad definition of a relic but I want us to understand that the idea of treasuring something because it can remind us of a loved one is not some quirky idea that only Catholics have. No, it is a human response to our human predicament. And what predicament is that? In a simple phrase, that predicament is that everything passes. If we are leaving a home we have lived in for years, we might just take something from that home to remind us that we lived there. It could be a stone from the garden or picture of the house. If we are praying our farewells to someone we loved who has not passed from this life into eternity, we just might find ourselves holding onto something of theirs in order to be reminded of their presence—a ring, a watch, a book. The inclination to keep a fragment of what once was whole is a very human inclination. Religion uses this to great effect.

By the way, this is one reason I think it is perfectly permissible for Christians to celebrate Christmas with ornaments, trees, songs sung about snow or chestnuts on an open fire, Santa and reindeer and so on and so forth. We are part of a larger world, an entire culture of signs and symbols that make life meaningful for us. Once you affirm that God is Creator, it becomes very difficult to push aside the world as somehow unholy. Once you affirm that Jesus loves the world, it becomes difficult to say that there are parts of the world which should be shunned as we celebrate his life. A scientist and priest by the name of Teilhard de Chardin once said, “There is nothing here below that is profane for those who have eyes to see.” The difference between a believer and a person who is completely secular is that we as believers celebrate all of these things as the gift of God whereas a secular person or non-believer simply reduces all of this to a season in the marketplace.

The things that make us; those strands of meaning woven and knitted and sewn into the fabric of our larger selves; these things all work together to locate us in time and place. They are in fact what help us to remember each other. It is why upon smelling chocolate chip cookies in the oven and the pine scent from the tree that you can find yourself gliding back into time and hearing your father’s voice or mother’s instructions on how long to beat the batter or the touch of your grandfather’s hand on your hand or your grandmother’s laughter. All of these things comprise us. None of these things are to be condemned but in fact, they are treasured for how they connect us to each other and especially to God.

Our Christmas reliquary is rather disorganized and voluminous. We have ornaments, pictures, homemade objects, stockings, and other

things that we cart out every year at this time. And as we touch those things, we converse about Christmases past and remember fondly the things we did or said. I'm pretty sure you have a Christmas reliquary too—a box or place where you store things that remember you to each other and that help you remember those who are separated from you by miles or by this mortal coil.

Now having established that we have such a thing as a Christmas reliquary, I want to show you where in Luke's gospel we find a Christmas reliquary. It is the 19th verse of that second chapter. A very simple verse, nonetheless, it speaks volumes about Mary, the mother of Jesus and volumes about us. It says, "But Mary kept all these things, pondering them in her heart." Some translations will say that she "treasured" these things. Same thing—she kept and treasured these things so that she could ponder them in her heart. What were those things? Her journey with Joseph to Bethlehem; her birthing experience; the witnesses of animals in the stall and the testimony of the shepherds. She kept these things in her heart. She pondered them.

This is the Christmas reliquary sitting at the end of that infancy narrative in Luke. It is an old box, centuries old, millennia old, handed down through time to you. Tonight, we receive this reliquary and open it in order to ponder its contents that include not only a star in the sky with a tail as big as a kite, angelic choirs singing, shepherds praising, a manger, a mother and father full of awe and wondering where their journey will take them next, but a holy child who, when he leaves his home to begin a ministry will be so filled with light that those who behold him will declare him to be nothing less than the Light of the World. Ponder these things in your hearts. Amen. ✕