

Mary, Mother of God
(Numbers 6:22-27 / Luke 2:16-21)
01.01.2016

If Descartes could say *I think therefore I am*, it seems to me the follow on from this is that, in a certain sense, *we are what we think* – although I would not be as reductive as to say that this is all we are.

While James Allen and others have concluded that *we are the sum total of our thoughts*, I see a danger with this discourse. The danger is that it is purely self-referential. That being said, there is absolutely no doubt that our thoughts are important. How we think about ourselves matters, but as created beings we cannot satisfy ourselves to be simply self-referential.

We are – all of us, as is every human being – *made in the image and likeness of God*. The implication of this statement is without reference to God we are less than our total self.

We come from God and will find our fulfilment in God. We are complete only when we make reference to the mind of God for our lives.

We might ask then: just what is the mind of God for us?

I believe the Scripture passages we read this morning – on this first day of the New Year – reveal to us that God holds in His mind and heart the desire to see each one of us living in grace and blessing. The Lord longs for us to enjoy peace, the well-being and fullness of life that are to be found in sharing in His nature. It is this that explains our God having taken upon Himself our human nature. He did this so that we might come to share in His divine nature. *God became one with us (one of us), so that we might all become one with Him*. This belief is at the heart of our Christian faith. It is central to the mystery we celebrate at Christmastide – and, indeed, it is underlined for us in today's *Solemnity of the Mother of God, Mary Theotokos*.

It is vital for our truest well-being that we remember who and what we are, from whom we come and to whom we go.

We are children of our earthly parents certainly, we share in their nature, but we are more than that: we are also, as St John keeps reminding us, *children of God* and we share in His nature.

How easily we forget that!

When we do, we actually diminish our dignity as human beings, we deprive ourselves of something of our humanity, we live less than fully human lives.

It is so important for us to keep in mind who and what we are: we are *children of God*. It is Christ-Jesus who has revealed this to us, and He did so, precisely by espousing our humanity when He was born of Mary of Nazareth.

I opened this reflection by referring to the importance of our thoughts. Our thoughts matter. We know this from experience, do we not?

When it comes to our health, our well-being, our deepest peace, an awful lot depends upon our frame of mind.

Who among us has not suffered due to negative thought patterns, at one time or other, in the unfolding of their life-story?

We are all capable of experiencing emotional pain, anxiety and even distress when we allow our negative thought patterns to take hold of us and when we allow our inner darkness to speak to us.

When we become sombre, overshadowed, negative, darkened, then we should not be afraid to admit to own up to the fact that we are suffering from a malaise that needs to be attended to. I know we are more loathe to speak of mental illness and emotional distress than we are to speak of physical aches and pains, but we should not allow ourselves to be paralysed by words such as depression,

inner emptiness and emotional pain.

We may shy away from the term depression because of our fears and the taboo which still surrounds the reality of mental illness, but who among us has not known some form of depression at some period in their life?

If we were to say we have never felt depressed, then I suspect we are in denial or totally lacking in good, healthy, self-awareness.

What makes me say this?

Well, every human life is marked by separation and loss at some stage or other and every separation and loss necessarily engenders a depression within us – it does this to varying degrees, of course. I admit it is often only a mild depression or slight melancholy we feel, but we are always impacted in some way by what we have been through.

We inevitably become downcast and feel lonely when we lose a loved one or when a relationship we value breaks down and/or even just changes somewhat. We feel a bit *down on it*, as we say. We are impacted by such normal transitions as transferring from one educational establishment to another, changing job, moving house, being changed in assigned ministry. We are impacted when we awaken to the fact that we are ageing, when we retire etc.

During such periods of transition and change, at those times when we don't feel quite *in form*, on the occasions when we are somewhat *out of sorts*, our thoughts matter all the more. They can take on a great importance.

All this also impacts upon our spiritual lives – as, indeed, it impacts upon our physical well-being. We are, after all, whole beings. Everything holds together in us. What is going on at one level affects us at other levels of our lives.

It is important to bear this in mind when we try to see clearly what is going on in our lives.

For example, what we might classify as sinful acting out (giving way to a compulsive/addictive behaviour) is often more a symptom of a deeper ill, something rooted at another level of our being, than the level at which the symptom occurs. What might be thought of as a sinful action may, in fact, be more akin to a sedative we have provided for ourselves and have had recourse to in a vain attempt to deaden our deep inner pain.

The spiritual tradition has always emphasised the importance of our thought patterns.

The monastic teachers especially draw great attention to the importance of being vigilant over the thoughts that arise in one's heart, stressing the need to bare these thoughts to an experienced spiritual guide. The opening of one's heart has always been considered fundamental to one's spiritual health in monastic circles. We find St Benedict drawing attention to this in his *Rule for Monks*. In the Rule, Benedict speaks of the abbot and other spiritual fathers in the community acting as *wise physicians*. He sees them as capable of exercising a healing ministry in regard to those confided to their care, *because they are aware of and have learned to deal with their own wounds and afflictions*. It is their self-awareness which equips them to help their brothers and sisters who are suffering to deal with their afflictions and their ills.

The monastic tradition has constantly emphasised the therapeutic value of opening up one's inner life to another trusted person in spiritual accompaniment.

A whole series of monastic texts could be drawn upon to substantiate this claim.

If negative thoughts are to be owned up to, admitted to, exposed, brought out into the light, and, where appropriate and possible, shared with an experienced guide, this is so that these negative (often self-destructive) thoughts can be set aside and avoided in the future. They are spoken *out* so that the one who dares to put them into words can be freed from their hold upon them.

This speaking out of negative thought patterns is important, certainly, but it is not enough.

Our negative thought patterns must also be replaced.

All the self-destructive, undermining things we say to ourselves, must be replaced by positive

thoughts and formulations. We need to have recourse to re-structuring words to replace those which have de-structured us.

We need, above all, to have recourse to God's life-giving word to counteract the negativity we so often give way to and allow to assail us.

This is where what we read in today's gospel passage comes in with a word of life for us. Today's gospel provides us with an insight that can help us greatly.

On this first day of the New Year when the Church invites us to celebrate the Solemnity of the Mother of God, we read in Luke's gospel: *As for Mary, she treasured all these things and pondered them in her heart.*

What were the things Mary treasured?

They were all the positive things the shepherds repeated of what they had been told about the child Jesus. They were the angel's message to them, the chorus the whole host of heaven sang around them. The shepherds remembered and repeated (they clearly made their own) God's word relayed to them about who the child Jesus was and what His mission would be.

They had been told that they should not be afraid. They were assured that the One who was born was to be for them and for the whole world a source of great joy, that His message would be gospel (Good News) for everyone! They were told that He was the Saviour, the great liberator, the One who would herald and usher in an era of peace. The word *peace* in the Bible means more than just absence of conflict. It speaks of fullness of life, total well-being.

It was all this that, in her turn, Mary *treasured and pondered in her heart.*

Mary's mind and heart were filled with good thoughts, blessed feelings.

I find this instructive and encouraging for us who so often allow ourselves to be submerged and overcome – laden and pulled down – by painful thoughts: be that thoughts stemming from a guilt-ridden past or due to an uncertain future.

Let's admit it. We allow so many things – past experiences and future concerns – to intrude upon and disrupt the present. Some days these disturbing thoughts can totally destabilise us; they can make us feel febrile emotionally; they can lead us to be spiritually enfeebled.

Our thoughts can depress us, our memories can torture us, our rumination over past hurts can sap away our energy, they can make us rot within (people talk of feeling *rotten* sometimes). Our thoughts matter! Our memories of past experiences and our projections into future fears can paralyse and poison our lives.

We must break free from the darker issues that we allow to take hold of us. We must bring them into the light, or rather invite the One who is *the Light which has come into the world* to come and walk with us through the shadow-land to lead us beyond it, out into His own glorious light.

We are told that *a great light shone all around when the angel appeared to the shepherds.* One translation reads: *Suddenly an angel appeared among them, and the landscape shone bright with the glory of the Lord.*

(The evangelist Luke notes that *the shepherds were frightened* at this stage, but they were immediately reassured by the angel that there was no cause to fear the light. There is no reason for us to fear the light either!)

Mary shows us how thoughts about positive things, how looking to the light, welcoming it into our lives, paying heed to the word of God which comes to us in so many ways – including through those messengers God sends our way – can lift our spirits and give us the courage we need to take the steps forward that are required of us as we journey through life.

We can take it that Mary had frequent recourse to all she treasured and stored up in her heart. (The evangelist Luke refers to her doing this more than once!) She must have drawn upon this inner reserve and found in it a rich source of hope at each step along her pilgrim way. I think of her

drawing encouragement from *all she treasured in her heart and pondered* especially at those difficult moments she was led to traverse, at those times when she could not quite understand God's ways

When we do as Mary did – when we hold all things concerning Christ in our hearts – then we take steps toward wholeness and well-being. Pondering the joy with the sorrow, the awesome with the awful, the gain with the pain, leads us to emotional and spiritual health. It contributes to that on-going healing process we need to be experiencing in our lives.

It is good for us to be reminded of this on this first day of the New Year.

The simple words of blessing heard in today's first reading set us out on the journey that opens up for us in this Year of Grace with a radiance of hope and peace glowing within us.

Aaron's blessing reflects the light of God. It speaks of God's desire for all His people – ourselves included.

It draws to our attention that God is the source of all blessings, grace and peace in life.

It reminds us that it is only through fostering and maintaining an intimate relationship with our loving, caring, merciful, bountiful God that we can hope to experience the fullness of life for which we long.

It really is fullness of life – biblical *Shalom* – that is described in our first reading today.

The blessing of Aaron – which I believe we can hear as one we are all called to make our own today – seems to build up to its final word. We could, of course, say that it also reposes upon the One who is, in Himself, that final word: *Christ our peace*.

The beautiful Hebrew word *Shalom* implies a sense of completeness – a sense of total well-being – health of heart, mind, body and soul, contentment, joy in communion with God, reconciliation within our self and harmony with others.

God offers this to anyone who is willing to follow Him, especially to those who have been bruised and broken, hurt and wounded through the painful experiences of life.

Just as the word of God took flesh in Mary – and did so, so fully that we refer to her as *Mother of God, Theotokos* – so the word of God wants to take flesh in our lives today.

Taking flesh in us, the Word wants to enthuse us by His presence which we are given to carry within: *En-Theos*

God's desire is to see us enter into this New Year with fresh energy, renewed vigour.

Mary had been told that a sword would pierce her own heart too – and it did!

When this happened, Mary surely did then what Luke tells she did constantly: *treasuring everything concerning Jesus in her heart*, when needed, Mary must have drawn upon the positive messages concerning Him, the positive memories she had of Him. Above all, she must have had recourse to that assurance given to her that He was (and still is!) *our light and our salvation*.