

## Christmas and the Workplace

The gold standard for Christmas stories has long been Luke 2: 1-20. Its details are vivid and its characters, believable. Luke tells us about Jesus' birth; but, his emphasis is on the *so what* for his readers and their/our daily lives. Two interesting features of Luke's story are its setting in the Workplace, and its implied invitation for us to enter the story, and reflect on our responses to Jesus.

Luke gives us three sets of characters: Emperor Augustus, Mary, and the shepherds. Who do we relate most closely to in our responses to Jesus?

Caesar Augustus was one of Rome's greatest emperors. Luke mentions Augustus in a workplace context, ruling and taxing the world. Augustus had a vision for the world which he was privileged to make real. Rome had become the capital of nations, bordering on the Mediterranean Sea. All nations and peoples did what Caesar wanted.

For all of Augustus' vision and abilities, he did not include God. Life in his workplace, the Roman Empire, was all he could see. So, when God came into Augustus's empire, Augustus was too busy either to notice or care.

Many people, today, are like Caesar - gifted with extraordinary ability to make their visions real. Luke's story prods us to ask ourselves: how are we like Caesar Augustus? How do we respond to God? How do we find God's presence in God's and our world? Who or what is our spiritual center: our careers and ambition, or God?

Luke's next character is Mary, whose 'workplace' was the manger in which Jesus was born. Luke's earlier stories about Mary present her as devout, obedient and faithful to God. In the Magnificat (Luke 1:47-55), we see how Mary loved God.

Luke makes an interesting remark about Mary. He said, she *treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart*. Although Mary had always loved God, and experienced God's love, God called her to go deeper. Her heart pondered what God was doing, as Luke tells us elsewhere in his Gospel, for the rest of her life. She gradually recognized that *religion*, which calls for devotion, obedience and faithfulness, is really a *relationship* centered in God's love. Devotion etc are responses in love which we give to God. But, the depth of God's love is what Mary pondered - and perhaps, struggled with at times - for the rest of her life.

How are we like Mary, in our personal and working lives? How do our responses to God develop beyond devotion, obedience and faithfulness into love? Is Christianity a set of truths, packaged in our Creeds? Or, does it embrace with the very person of God, who loves each of us more than we can imagine? Mary went further in her relationship with God than most Biblical characters did. But, since God is always more than what we imagine, Mary needed to *ponder in her heart* for the rest of her richly blessed life.

Next, Luke tells us about some shepherds. Shepherds were not known for piety or faithfulness. For the most part, they were religious outcasts, economically disadvantaged, and social rejects. God's angels went to their workplace, and invited them to meet Jesus. Overwhelmed by what they heard and saw, the shepherds went to Bethlehem to meet Jesus. We don't know what transpired between them and Jesus; but, something dramatic happened! Luke says that they returned to their work, rejoicing and glorifying God. Everyone who saw them was amazed - including Mary, who pondered what she saw.

Are we like the shepherds? Are we unemployed, under-employed or overworked? Are we unappreciated as people and in what we do? Do employers treat us with indifference? Does the public either ignore us or put us down? God's heart aches for us! God wants to bless us with purpose and meaning which only God can give. Our Good News is: in the shepherds' experience, we have a measure of how much God loves us, and how real God's love is. The shepherds' work did not change; but, they did. We, too, can go to our less-than-happy work, and places of work, rejoicing in our spirits. The 'how,' we must leave to God. The shepherds' experience encourages us that God will love and act for us, as we open ourselves to the possibility of God in our lives.

God offers us the same love as God gave to Caesar (who didn't notice or care), Mary (who pondered God's love with her heart), and the shepherds (whose lives were transformed). Blessed Christmas!

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