

Mary reads a book and Joseph holds the child



Christmas to me is full of pictures, the nativity scene of course, often in old and modern paintings, the Christmas tree of my childhood and the scenes in the church where we went when I still lived with my parents. Then, later, Christmas celebrations in all the places I have lived throughout my life.

Only a few years ago I came across the painting which you find on the front page of your bulletin. I saw it, and I loved it.

Mary reads a book and Joseph holds the child.

I so love this, because it has so much to do with my own life, with sharing the everyday tasks with my husband, with breaking through the stereotype role models and doing the unusual things rather than the traditional...

This painting is a very old Christmas picture from the 15th century. The original is an illustration from northern France. It focuses on very little: hardly anything can be seen of the stable, angels or shepherds are missing, only ox and donkey are left in the stable next to the Holy Family. It's as if the painter takes us with him, very close to Maria, Joseph, and the child.

There is something very quiet about the atmosphere. Everyone looks busy but focused and complete within themselves. The donkey seems a bit forgotten. The fact that it seems to be nibbling on Joseph's halo doesn't bother anyone. The ox carries a bell around his neck; it has raised its head and looks, with interest, at Mary. But she doesn't notice. She has bowed her head slightly, sits

upright, wrapped in a large red blanket, wearing a light-yellow robe and holding a book in her hand. She reads.

That's unusual - everything about Mary is unusual. In many Christmas scenes she wears a blue robe, blue as the sky, and, besides that, she either holds the child in her arms or looks at it lying in the crib.

This task is Joseph's in our picture. Joseph, who often is placed more at the side of the nativity scene, sometimes only in the background... sometimes he chops wood. But not here. Here he has completely taken on the role of a father. He holds the child carefully and brings it close to his face. He is genuinely happy that he is now a father with a newborn child.

In this picture, Mary and Joseph are swapping roles. How very special and how very nice!

I'm happy about it, and I think men, and especially fathers, can be happy about this picture as well. Women and mothers can rejoice, too, because the father shares responsibility with them.

Mary is free to read a book. She does what she likes to do: She reads and doesn't let herself be bothered by the needs of the baby. Everyone seems okay with this. Everyone seems content.

I find this image from the Middle Ages very modern in terms of the understanding of the roles of men and women. Obviously, there were women in the 15th century who liked to read, and men who liked to hold their children in their arms. The painter must have seen such unusual division of tasks, otherwise he or she would not have painted this.

We can't see what Mary is reading, but we can come up with ideas of our own. Since there were not very many books in the Middle Ages, one can assume that

she reads the Bible. Some Old Testament scripture maybe. Texts of the prophets of old? Maybe she's reading them right there?

Perhaps she comes across Jesus' name "Wonderful Council", "Prince of Peace" in the book of the prophet Isaiah? Is that what this child is supposed to become and bring? The prophets foretold the birth. The angel had told her.

Jesus, her boy, a bringer of justice and peace. Did Mary like the thought of it?

Perhaps the Mary of our painting is also looking at texts that deal with peace and justice. In her Song of Praise, she praised God, who throws the mighty from their throne and lifts the poor. Such were Mary's images and dreams of justice and peace.

In Mary's day it was the Roman Empire that ruled half the world and was neither peaceful nor fair. There were terror and violence. Peace existed only for the oppressors and the powerful. The ordinary people had no peace.

Perhaps Mary has also opened the passage in Isaiah in which he describes this peace that the "Prince of Peace" is supposed to bring in precise pictures: "There will come someone who is surrounded by righteousness and faithfulness.

The wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid, the calf and the lion and the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them...

Mary reads further in Isaiah. God wants the transformation of the world: "Nobody will do evil and cause mischief on Zion, God's holy mountain." There will be peace everywhere. That is probably what Mary reads, and its peace shines through to us in this beautiful painting.

Here we can stop imagining what Mary is reading. Here we can come with our own questions from a world that is not at peace, and bears so many dangers... Here we can weave our life stories into the story of Mary, Joseph, and the child. Here we can find our own place in this 15th century Christmas picture.

It would be so nice to read about peace in peace and quiet. But instead, we live in the fourth wave of a pandemic with mutations of the illness which our vaccines are not yet prepared for. What a mess again. What fears this sets free. Sometimes I can hardly believe all this.

And I paint my doubts and my anxieties into the Christmas picture. I imagine the times of fear and terror in which Mary lived. Did the prophet's boundless optimism inspire her? Can it inspire me in this season of love, light, and peace? Can it make me calm, bold, and strong?

We celebrate Christmas with questions: big, fearful, and significant. We do it every year, but especially now, in December 2021. The desire to give birth to something whole and healing, to something calm and peaceful this Christmas, is probably stronger than in many years before. Our world, our lives, our well-being are so much more fragile than before.

We want peace where it is missing. Joy where it's lost. Reconciliation where hatred and competition rule. Rest where we are restless. Ideas where we have long lost our dreams. Comfort where people mourn and suffer....

We want heaven on earth. God living with us. We want the peace and light of Christmas to shine on our everyday lives and fill our fearful hearts.

We want: Peace and reconciliation, rest and joy, the splendor of heaven and God among us: all of this wants to grow and become big and strong, like the child in the manger.

Because so many people's hopes have not yet been fulfilled, because there is so much suffering to which the answer is missing, because there are so many paths that would be right, but which have not yet been walked...

That's why we celebrate Christmas every year. All of this is important to be remembered. Again, and again. Every single day of our lives. So that one day it will fully come true... here in this world.

But enough of Mary and us. What about Joseph? He still holds his child in his arms. Warmly, tenderly, gently.

But we all know that only a few days later an angel will meet him in his sleep and warn him. He will wake Mary that night and they will set off for Egypt. Jesus and his family had to flee in order to escape King Herod's order to kill the infants.

Back then, in Bethlehem, it was like it is today: Christmas – if at all - is a pause on a stony and dangerous path.

Before and after the rules of the world go on. Hunger, terror, power games, greed and hate continue. Therefore, let us hold fast to the brief moment of peace and transformation in our Christmas painting: Mary reads and Joseph holds the child...

Let us take Christmas out into the world, hold fast to it in our lives, and make it shine in the darkness of Corona, fear and hopelessness.

In this awesome old painting, we were at the manger and will not forget the God, who came so close. Amen.