

Address for 19 December, 4th Sunday in Advent, by Bill Pattinson

The Visitation - Micah 5:2-5a; Luke 1:39-55

“Mary must have been pleased that Elizabeth was in.” So started Martin Warner, now Bishop Martin of Chichester, in a sermon he gave during our Eucharist service at the Church of the Visitation on our pilgrimage to the Holy Land in 2008. I remember the gradual uphill walk to the church, passing stunning white blossom, before ascending the many steps to the Church. In the courtyard there is a simple statue of Mary, the just pregnant teenager, greeting Elizabeth, the elder relative, more grandmother than mother, and now at least six months pregnant. Malcolm Guite writes in his sonnet “The Visitation”:

“Mary stands with all we call too young
Elizabeth with all called past their prime.”

On the wall beyond the statue the words of Mary’s song of praise, the Magnificat, are written in many different languages on ceramic plaques. What a wonderful, uplifting story this is. Two women, both miraculously pregnant with sons whose destinies are terrifyingly huge, warmly greeting each other with joy, inviting us this Advent to take comfort in their hope, their witness to God, who is coming to lift up the lowly.

In Israel two thousand years ago women were considered to be amongst the most lowly of society. Well, in this story of two women, and there aren’t many such stories in the Gospels, it may be in the house of the priest Zechariah, but it is not the illustrious male who declares God’s truth. Mark in his Gospel has nothing to say about Jesus’ birth; John speaks of the cosmos, of the Word becoming flesh. Matthew recounts the birth from the privileged male perspective, Joseph’s and the wise men’s. Only in Luke do we read of Mary and Elizabeth; only in Luke do we share the lowly’s point of view, of the women’s and the shepherds’. And just let’s contrast how the men behave and how the women behave. When the Angel Gabriel visits Mary with the news she will give birth to God’s Son, after only one question of concern, “How can this be, since I am a virgin?”, she offers a positive, “Yes!” “Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.” Elizabeth when she meets and is greeted by Mary is gifted with prophetic, joyful insights. Without asking Mary anything she recognises God’s work in Mary, “Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb.” Turning to the men’s behaviour. When Joseph discovered that Mary was pregnant, though not by him, we read in Matthew

that, “ being unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, he planned to dismiss her quietly.” Not sure I know how Joseph would have done that. And, of course, when Zechariah hears from Angel Gabriel that his wife will bear a son, he doesn’t believe because of their ages. God presses the mute button until John is born. The women believe, show their faith and do God’s will; the men are hesitant in belief, less faithful in doing God’s will. How do those who question the priesthood of women respond to that? Actually many scholars, probably all men, argue this passage is really about the way in which John the Baptist recognises Jesus even from inside the womb with his leap of joy. Whatever next?

Returning to the beginning of my sermon, why was Mary pleased that Elizabeth was in? Well, Mary had just travelled from Nazareth to a hill town in Judae, probably Ein Karem, where the Church of the Visitation stands today. This town is about five miles south west of Jerusalem. The journey is about eighty miles and there would be some tough hills to climb. It’s the equivalent of travelling from Exeter to Bath over the Mendips. Mary probably walked. At a good walking pace, for me anyway, say two and a half miles an hour, that’s thirty two hours. She would, indeed, be pleased Elizabeth was in. But why the need for such an arduous journey?

After Gabriel had given Mary his amazing news, he also informed her that her relative, Elizabeth, in her old age had also conceived a son six months ago. “Nothing will be impossible with God,” Gabriel declares. It seems perfectly understandable that Mary would wish to share her news with an elderly relative and especially one who herself had miraculously conceived. They would have a great deal to share. So we are told Mary went with haste to tell Elizabeth of Gabriel’s breathtaking news.

“She had not held her secret long enough
To covet it but wished it shared as though
Telling would tame the terrifying moment.”

So writes Elizabeth Jennings at the beginning of her poem “The Visitation”.

From the moment that the unborn child leapt for joy in Elizabeth’s womb after hearing Mary’s greeting, until Mary left three months later these two women would have calmed each others’ anxieties, celebrated their joyful situations and supported each other as they looked to God’s new future, which was carried in their wombs.

Jane Williams writes:

“These pregnancies are part of the same action that will raise Jesus from the dead: they are part of the irrepressible vitality of God.”

So not only is this a wonderful, uplifting story, it heralds the revolution which will bring in God's new order. Elizabeth will give birth to the one who will prepare the way for the child Mary has only just conceived, for the saviour of the world. "For now he shall be great to the ends of the earth; and he shall be the one of peace," prophesied Micah in this morning's first reading. And Mary knows all this in the singing of her revolutionary song of praise to God, where the hungry will be filled with good things, while the rich will be sent empty away.

Unfortunately the world pandemic has exposed grave divisions between the hungry and the rich. It has been the rich who has filled themselves with good things, vaccinations, while the hungry and lowly have been sent away empty. So we must continue to pray for the coming of the revolution, for the coming of God's kingdom and for equal distribution of the vaccine throughout the world. This Advent is not just about listening to God's promises, sitting and waiting for something to happen. It's about active hoping and waiting, where we play our part, as did Mary and Elizabeth, to bring forth God's new world, his promised kingdom, where the powerful will be brought down from their thrones, the lowly will be lifted up, the proud will be scattered in the thoughts of their hearts, where the hungry will be filled with good things and the rich will be sent empty away.