

Reflection on Sunday 22 December 2024

by Adrian Walter, Lay Leader of Worship

Gospel reading: Luke 1. 26-45

When Christmas actually began

Stella and I have two children, a son and a daughter; they're now both in their 40's but when they were in their late teens it was very interesting to observe how they and their peers saw their futures. Some wanted to be doctors or lawyers (our son just wanted to be a lobster catcher!) However, it was when the subject of babies came up that things became most fascinating.

Remember, our children are Millennials, so they are tec savvy, pragmatic and, most of all, career orientated, but, as soon as one of them announced they were expecting, the whole group tumbled like a house of cards and they all fell pregnant, almost overnight, and, apparently, they all made the decision quite independently!

In the Gospel account we've just read, two cousins suddenly find themselves unexpectedly pregnant or about to be so, but this is no millennial style group thing. For a start, they may be related but it is doubtful that they were close as they live nigh on 100 miles apart and they are at opposite ends of the age range. Elizabeth is elderly, generally thought to be in her late eighties, whereas Mary is very young, possibly only just in her teens. However, they do have one thing in common, they shouldn't find themselves in this condition. Elizabeth had been childless all of her life and, in any case, was now far too old to bear children, while

Mary was engaged but as yet unmarried and, therefore, definitely shouldn't be about to get pregnant.

This is a well-known part of the Christmas narrative but it's very easy to see it purely in terms of "scene setting", a sort of prelude to the main event. If, like us, you have a nativity that comes out each Christmas, you will have a piece of Christmas art which comprises a stable, a manger, perhaps a star and an angel, a few sheep and cows, some shepherds, Mary and Joseph, a baby and three wise men. The scene spans a couple of years after the birth of the Messiah, however over one third of the Christmas story is missing as it started some 15 months earlier with Gabriel's visit to Zechariah, and this missing third, often skipped over, has some important things to say to us today.

This passage in Luke is known as the Visitation, it's a scene that depicts the joyful meeting of Mary and her cousin Elizabeth, but it reveals so much more than that, in fact it sets out a process as to how our faith should be lived out, which is just as relevant today as it was then.

First, we learn that **God compels.**

When you recognise that God has done, or is doing, something significant in your life it should compel you to act. Mary had just been told by the angel Gabriel she would become miraculously pregnant and give birth to a son who will be called Jesus. He would be the Son of the Most High and would reign over a kingdom which will never end. When she asked how this could be,

the confirmation she was given was that her elderly cousin was already pregnant and God's word never fails. Mary believed what the angel told her and, as a result, we read that she **hurried to the hill country of Judea, to the town where Zechariah lived**. That's almost 100 miles south and the journey would doubtless have been made on foot, but Mary is going there to spend some time with, and support, her cousin Elizabeth, who she believes will understand and believe her because Elizabeth is a very spiritual woman who Mary now realises must be in the same miraculous condition.

Mary heard God's message and believed it, and this compelled her to do something. She neither procrastinated nor hesitated and this is how faith should work in reality. God speaks, we hear, we believe, we do something. Yes, there is a time for prayer and reflection, after all, Mary had another nine months to reflect on what Gabriel had said, but we need to have a sense of urgency when God speaks to us because, as Paul tells us in Corinthians, the time is short and, as Alan reminded us last Sunday, we never know how long we, or anyone else, has left.

Next it shows us how **God encourages**.

Luke tells us that Mary **entered the house and greeted Elizabeth**. This greeting was not by means of a hug or bland statement like "Welcome to our home" or "Come in, it's lovely to see you." It was so much more. In Biblical times, when two people **greeted** one another it meant they shared with one another. Today, we'd call it a catch-up.

So, Mary comes in and unpacks while Elizabeth puts the kettle on (or whatever they did in the first century) and the two women start to talk. Elizabeth tells Mary about what God has done for her and Mary tells Elizabeth what God has said He will do through her, and they discover that what God was doing in each of their lives was connected. They needed each other, God was encouraging them through their greeting, through each believing the other, because no one else was going to believe them at first.

But there's more. Look again at the passage - Luke tells us that when Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, or news, **"the baby leapt in her womb"**, and, filled with the Holy Spirit, exclaimed: **"Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the child you will bear! ... As soon as the sound of your greeting reached my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy!"**

The same is true for us. What God is doing in your life and what He is doing in the lives of those around you is often far more connected than we realise. That connection may be with someone we haven't even met yet, but sooner or later our paths will cross and we will each encourage or need the encouragement of the other. However, it only works if we are willing to share with each other in the way that Mary and Elizabeth were.

Look around - how much do we know about the people here today? How much are we willing to share about what God is doing in our lives? What may seem a bit insignificant to us may be a great encouragement to someone else and discovering that

someone else has faced the issues we now face could be just the encouragement we need.

Thirdly, we discover that **God blesses**.

Woven through this passage is the golden thread of blessing. Elizabeth says to Mary, "**God has blessed you above all women, and your child is blessed.**" This does not elevate Mary to being the greatest woman of all time, but it means she was blessed more than any woman who will ever live because she will carry and give birth to the Son of God. She has been blessed with the incredible privilege. Elizabeth then ends by saying, "**Blessed is she who has believed that the Lord would fulfil his promises to her!**" Note the word "has". Not might or maybe. Mary will be blessed because she has believed God and acted upon that belief.

Now, this is also something that Mary needs to hear, especially because at this point, she has not told Joseph, her fiancé, what has happened, and it will be another three months before she does tell him. And when she does, Joseph is not going to believe her and will make the decision to leave her. At that moment, Mary is not going to feel blessed. What God tells us on the mountain top which makes us feel blessed, we need to remember in the valley when we don't feel blessed... but always remembering that our God is faithful.

Fourthly, we see that **God brings joy**.

And in the middle of the two blessings, Elizabeth says to Mary, **“When I heard your greeting, the baby in my womb jumped for joy.”** Why is this relevant? Well, according to verse 15, the angel who spoke to Elizabeth’s husband, Zechariah, said that John **“will be filled with the Holy Spirit, even before his birth”** and so when we read that John, while still in his mother’s womb, jumped for joy, it confirms that he was filled with the Holy Spirit before his birth. Remember, this is a supernatural encounter between Elizabeth, who is six months pregnant with John, and Mary, who is possibly only a few days pregnant with Jesus or very soon about to be.

When we hear what God has done and is doing does it make us want to jump for joy? As Christians we should want to have an interest, and want to be involved in, what He is doing and what He is doing should fill us with joy.

And, finally, it tells us that **God acts.**

God is not only a God of words, but a God of action. Elizabeth goes on to say to Mary, **“You are blessed because you believed that the Lord would do what he said.”** The reason Mary is blessed is because she believed God would do what He said, and because she believed she was blessed. That’s how it works, remember, God speaks, we hear, we believe, we do something, and this obedience produces blessing. Now, the blessing may not be in the form of what we expected or hoped for, but when we hear God’s Word and follow it up with belief and

obedience it always produces blessing to someone, in some way. When God speaks, He acts.

In conclusion...

...so, just to demonstrate that this isn't a one off, let's roll on nine months to a field outside Bethlehem where a bunch of shepherds also had a visitation. They, too, saw an angel who said, **"I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people..."** and we are told that they were compelled to act - they, **"hurried off and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby, who was lying in the manger."** They were blessed to be the first people in history to see the Son of God and they were an encouragement to Mary who, **"treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart."** And they were full of joy at what God was doing, because **"When they had seen him, they... returned glorifying and praising God... and they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child, and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them."** They heard, they acted, they encouraged, they were full of joy and they were blessed.

So, as we approach this Christmas time, may we take some time to listen to what God is saying to us which would bring us and those around us the joy that we all so often crave at this time. What might He be compelling us to do which would bring encouragement and blessing to us or someone else through us?

Amen