

Sermon. David Marshall Luke 1:39-55; Sunday 20 December 2015;

Although Christmas is now nearly upon us, we're still in the season of Advent, the season of waiting for the coming of Christ. Through Advent we've been thinking about those who prepared the way for Christ and today we focus especially on Mary, the mother of our Lord.

Our Gospel reading comes from just after Mary has been visited by the angel Gabriel, who has given her extraordinary news. Although still a virgin, she will conceive and give birth to a son, to be called Jesus; and Gabriel says this about him:

'The Lord God will give to him the throne of his father David,  
and he will reign over the House of Jacob (the people of Israel) for ever;  
and of his kingdom there will be no end.'

Gabriel's message is that Israel's long wait is coming to an end; Israel's promised king is coming: the king for whom Israel had longed for centuries and whom the prophets had foretold – as in today's OT reading from Micah, who speaks of one who will come from Bethlehem, to rule in Israel and be great to the ends of the earth, bringing peace and security. But the surprise is that it's through Mary, an unknown, unmarried teenager, that God's promise will be fulfilled. It's Mary who will give birth to the king.

And what does Mary do now? We know that she says to the angel: 'Let it be to me according to your word.' She accepts the task that God lays upon her. But what next? That is where today's reading picks up and we see Mary doing something very natural: she goes to visit an older relative, Elizabeth, who is also expecting a child. For both of them, pregnancy is quite unexpected because Elizabeth is a lot older than Mary and didn't think she and her husband Zechariah would ever have a child; but God has been at work there too and she is to give birth to a son who will grow up to be John the Baptist. So here we have these two women, whose lives have been totally disrupted by what God has done, and now they meet, and we have what is one of the most purely *joyful* scenes in the whole Bible.

Mary enters Elizabeth's house and calls out a greeting. And at this point enormous joy wells up in Elizabeth. She somehow knows what has happened with Mary; she understands the secret about the child Mary is bearing. And she calls down a blessing on Mary: 'Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb.' How *lucky* you are, Mary, and how wonderful to be bearing this extraordinary child. And how lucky, how incredibly privileged I am – Elizabeth goes on – that the mother of my Lord, the mother of Israel's king, should enter my house. She adds that the baby she is carrying danced for joy when Mary spoke. 'Don't be silly', we might say, 'it's just the baby kicking inside your tummy as babies do.' But Elizabeth says 'No, the child leapt for joy'; joy is breaking out everywhere.

And then Mary launches into a song of praise to God: my soul magnifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God...from now on everyone will say how blessed I am because of what God has done for me. Mary goes on to celebrate God's ways in the world; God's concern for the poor, the hungry and humble; and God's judgement on the

proud and those who think the world is their possession; God's surprising reversal of the world's ways of thinking.

It's an amazing scene as these two women, one teenager, one getting on in years, realize that they are both right at the heart of something new that God is doing. Something both old and new – expected for hundreds of years but now actually happening in their lives, in their very bodies. And what is happening in them is not just for their sakes but for the sake of the whole world, which is to be transformed into a place of justice and joy. God's kingdom is near.

How does this story of Mary and Elizabeth bear upon us as we prepare to celebrate Christmas this year? A couple of reflections.

As we read this story we might ask ourselves *how we recognise what God is doing in the world*. The story of Mary and of her part in the coming of Jesus into this world is now so familiar that we easily miss how strange it is. If we had been pious Jews 2000 years ago, waiting for God to act by sending the king who would restore the people of Israel, where and how would we expect the king to arrive? And who would we expect to be the first to recognise his coming? Probably we would look for guidance to our religious leaders, who have, as it were, special radar screens tuned in to what God is doing. Surely they would know how to discern God's ways? And surely Israel's king would arrive with a certain amount of ceremony and dignity?

But the story of Mary says no to all that. Mary's story tells us that God delights in doing things differently from how we might expect. If God wants to give his Messiah, the king of Israel, a good start in this world, why on earth does God choose as the Messiah's mother an unknown, unmarried teenage girl? As the story of this Messiah-king continues to unfold, right through to his death on the cross, the same difficulty confronts us. God doesn't do things as we might expect. He doesn't always, or even usually, act through the right kind of people. On the most impressive radar screens that we can devise for making sense of God and his ways, God's real activity doesn't always show up.

So as we celebrate Christmas we should recognise the freedom, the unpredictability and the humility which God showed at the first Christmas - and which presumably are still his trademarks today. There are doubtless Marys and Elizabeths around today, not in the public eye, not on any database of the great and good, but they, though they don't know it, are at the heart of things in the sight of Heaven, rejoicing in what God is doing in and through them to advance his kingdom in this world.

And there is both warning and encouragement in that.

Warning to those who think they are special, even indispensable to God; because as Mary says, God scatters those who are 'proud in the imagination of their hearts'.

Encouragement to those who think nothing of themselves but who, like Mary, have hearts open to serving God, doing God's will, being a blessing to other people. They stand with Mary, on the margins of this world but in the light of God, and they know what Mary knows: that God exalts the humble and meek and fills the hungry with good things. They share in Mary's joy, which cannot be taken from them.

One other point – somewhat related. At the heart of today’s Gospel story is a meeting between a teenager and a much older woman. It’s not stated that Mary was a teenager but because women were married off very young in those days we can safely assume it. An elderly woman and a teenager rejoicing together in the coming of Jesus into the world and supporting each other as they each do their part.

It’s a beautiful picture of the Church as it should be: old and young rejoicing together in God’s goodness. The young looking to the old for continuity, support, wisdom in the difficult task of living out God’s calling; the old delighted by what God is doing in the young, nurturing and honouring it, willing to welcome God’s disruptive ways. Old and young together in the Church: God’s people as they should be.

But that’s a challenging thought for us in the Church of England, because in large part, and in most churches up and down the land, we are a church of the old. In many places that may not be anyone’s fault; it may be despite the best efforts of churches to include the young; it may be because of developments in society and patterns of life that appear beyond our control. And yet if we are listening for the word of God this Christmas we must ask ourselves: where is Mary today? Where is the teenager today in whom God is doing his thing and bringing Christ into the world? And where does that teenager go to find Elizabeth, to seek support, advice, wisdom? Where do young and old meet?

Here at St John’s we are at a transitional time as we await our new vicar. I’m sure the place of young people within the life of St John’s will matter greatly to him, but this cannot be an agenda item for the new vicar alone.

As we celebrate Christmas this year let’s remember that it’s the story of a teenager, supported by a much older person, bringing Christ to the world.

What would that look like here?