

A sermon preached on Advent 4 –the Sunday before Christmas on Luke 1.39-55; the visit of Mary to Elizabeth.

If you had to summarise this morning's Gospel reading, you might say it's about new life within. It is –after all–about two pregnant women; one–we imagine– was approaching middle age; the other little more than a girl. It sometimes surprises us when we recall that Mary may have been very young indeed; perhaps early in her teenage years. Girls were often betrothed to men who were somewhat older, which is still the case in traditional cultures in South Asia and elsewhere. Even in England, it was only in 1929 that the law set the minimum age for marriage at sixteen (with parental consent). Before this, girls could marry at puberty, which could be very young indeed. It was people like Mary Sumner (founder of the Mothers' Union.) who campaigned in her later years to have the law changed to protect young girls becoming mothers too soon. Anyway, Mary was young –we don't know how young–Elizabeth was much older.

So we have this rather intimate moment between these two pregnant women. I confess that in making any comment about this passage of scripture, I feel out of my depth .I feel the way I did when as a “father to be” in the 1980's, I attended N.C.T. classes with Gaynor. N.C.T. is National Childbirth Trust and this was –I suppose –the beginnings of trying to involve men in the process of preparing for the birth of a baby. All I can remember is that –along with the other men I'm sure –I felt out of my depth and a bit awkward. Well, I feel the same with this reading. What can I say about the meeting of two expectant ladies?It would be more profitable to have a group of mothers of all ages discussing this; remembering their own pregnancies and sharing their own stories. Us men could just listen in from the sidelines. That would be the way to explore this story.

However, this story does come to us via a man.It is part of St. Luke's gospel, and we might wonder how Luke knew all this? After all –he wasn't there. Neither was he there at the visit of the angel Gabriel or at the birth of Christ or in the years of Jesus' childhood. He wasn't there. Did he get this story from Mary herself? She was–it seems–part of the early church in Jerusalem. Luke himself tells us so in Acts (I.14). Had Luke, the kindly doctor (and we trust the good listener) sat one day with Mary in

her latter years as she recounted her story? Or had he heard this story from others? Was it, by the time he wrote part of the early Christian tradition in his congregation? We don't know....

It seems as if he shaped this story by his reading of the Old Testament .Mary's song (which we call the Magnificat) is almost lifted straight from the First book of Samuel where Hannah, mother of the infant Samuel has a version of this song attributed to her (1 Sam 2). Or could it be that this song of Hannah's was a well known song amongst the poor communities of Palestine with its promise of God upturning the usual order-putting down the mighty, establishing the lowly? It's interesting to note that the Magnificat; always recited at Evening Prayer was once banned by our forefathers! It was during a time of unrest when the British ruled India. It was taken out of the service for fear that the locals would take its message to heart! Can you imagine the Church Notice Board. *Calcutta Cathedral. 6pm -Evensong.NOTE - there will be NO MAGNIFICAT TONIGHT!* I wonder what they sang instead? Mary's song might then have been a well-known song, Hannah's song, that Mary adapted for her own use. That bit about "*for behold, from henceforth all generations will call me blessed*" was personal to her. You know the way you might take a well-known song and add your own words when you're in the shower or driving on your own and no one is listening! Mary here might have done the same.

But Luke wasn't there at the first Christmas. And neither was Matthew, our other source of the familiar Christmas story, which we have simply blended together from the two, though they are very different accounts. These stories -treasured by some parts of the early Church -were quite unknown or at least not written about by other parts of the church. Neither Mark, nor John, nor Paul mention them. These stories in Matthew and Luke were shaped by them and told with theological purpose. For example -when Luke wrote his gospel there were still groups of people who followed the teaching of John the Baptist. Some may have believed that he -and not Jesus -was the Messiah. By telling this story of the meeting of Mary and Elizabeth, Luke is saying that even in the womb, John the Baptist recognised Jesus as his Lord; as the true Messiah. "*As soon as I heard your greeting*", said Elizabeth to Mary, "*the child in my womb leapt for joy.*" In other words, she could feel the child kicking, which must be a strange feeling! These are theological stories.

We live –as we all know– in an age of science, where we are expected to doubt everything, to test everything, to seek evidence, to respect the laws of nature. To minds shaped in such a culture, the Christmas story of a virgin birth, angels, shepherds and wise men feel like folk tales. And that is what they are: Stories told by people to other people. Stories shaped by communities and passed on. They may be MORE than this, but we cannot know what happened at the first Christmas. That Jesus of Nazareth was born is certain. That Mary was his Mother is certain. But the Mystery of that birth is hidden from us. What the stories are TRYING to say to us is exactly the same as what St. John tries to say to us, but in a quite different way. *“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God and the Word was God....The Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth....and we have beheld his glory, the glory as of the Father’s only Son”*. In other words, the whole Mystery of Christmas is about the Life of God taking residence here; becoming a human life; that Love which rules the Universe actually becoming one of us. God –if you like –showing his hand; or better –God showing his face. God sharing his very Self. That is the Mystery to which the Christmas stories are pointing. If they are nothing more than folk tales, then that’s OK. What actually happened on the first Christmas is hidden from us. What matters is the truth –or otherwise –of the claim that God has come to share our human life.

Mary and Elizabeth. Two expectant women. Both have New Life growing within them. One of those lives is the Life of God. No matter what our age or our gender, we all need new life within. New life brings Hope. We all need hope for the future. As we get older, we spend more of our time looking back. This is what sometimes makes Christmas such a bitter/sweet season. We look back –and there’s nothing wrong with that-but new life looks forward. We need hope for the future. We also need determination to make this world a more fitting place for new life to emerge –for the generations to come. We need new life within so that we can know that we are loved and valued by a Divine, eternal love. And so that we love and value others. We need new life within so that inner peace and well-being can be ours. We need new life within, because so often we need forgiveness and healing.

People sometimes speak of mum's to be as "blooming" or "glowing"; that time of pregnancy after the morning sickness, but before the pangs of labour. We pray that the "bloom" and the "glow" of God's New Life within may be ours -this Christmas- and into the future.

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