

The visitation: Luke 1 39-45 Advent four 23/12/18 SJB SSC: offered and tweaked also for Advent four 2021

We're surrounded already by the magic of Christmas in this beautifully decorated holy place- -there's a rich feast of words and music in celebration of the birth of Christ this very afternoon and evening. We may well have a lot on our minds, especially this year, about how best to manage the big week ahead, but on this final Sunday morning of Advent we're invited to set all of that aside for a few minutes; invited to focus on this encounter between two first century humble pregnant Jewish women- -one a lady of shall we say, riper years, and one a teenager, both expecting a baby for the first time in their lives.

As Luke records for us, Elizabeth is decidedly not young but she is , against all expectations, already six months into her pregnancy. Her husband Zechariah, a priest, told by an angel that it was not yet too late for him and his wife to conceive a much longed for child- -a son- - has been struck dumb. Why? Because he disbelieved the angel! However, he must have then had second thoughts because the child is most definitely on the way now and his tongue will be loosened in three months time when he confirms in writing, after the birth, the name given to the child by the angel- -the name John.

Mary is only a teenager, engaged but not yet married. She is newly pregnant by the Holy Spirit, after another amazing encounter with an angel.

These two women you may recall, are related but live quite a long distance apart. On a holy land pilgrimage these days you travel for a couple of hours by air-conditioned coach from Nazareth, the home of Mary and Joseph in Galilee, to Ein kerem the home of Elizabeth and Zechariah, up in the Judean hills. No such luxury for Mary. The only travel possibilities for her are on foot or by donkey. So why does she make this arduous journey in such a delicate condition? Not only has the angel told her that she is to be pregnant by the Holy Spirit but that her relative Elizabeth has conceived in her old age six months earlier. Mary has accepted the angel's message but now she has an understandable urge to get away- - both to escape wagging tongues and to see for herself. If it really is true it will absolutely confirm everything for Mary. So in her third month she sets off.

As she arrives after her long journey, elderly Elizabeth, her bump clearly showing, comes to the door and wow! She has an overwhelming experience of the Holy Spirit. As she opens the door to Mary she feels her unborn child leap inside her and she cries out in an inspired prophetic greeting words treasured down the centuries. In the old translation they go: "Hail Mary full of grace the Lord is with thee. Blessed art thou among women and blessed is the fruit of thy womb Jesus". "Hail Mary". Many people

think these words are some invention of the mediaeval church. No! They are Elizabeth's spirit-inspired greeting recorded by Luke! Mary responds with a great outpouring of praise and prophecy that we know as the Magnificat- -Mary's song. In it she echoes Old testament scriptures that would have been part of her prayer life- -almost part of her DNA. There are echoes of Hannah when she conceived the infant Samuel. Echoes of other prophets who spoke of God's kingdom values, very different from the world's values. The humble blessed and lifted up, the proud brought low, The poor and hungry receiving good things and the rich being sent away empty, the promises made long ago to Abraham being at last fulfilled.

Yes, truly both of these women at their point of meeting are given rich spirit filled insights and reassurances that will help them in the testing times to come. Terrible times when their sons will be called to serve God in dangerous ways and both will be executed, John, Elizabeth and Zechariah's precious son by beheading and Jesus, his cousin, by crucifixion.

It's astonishing that the spirit filled words of these two humble women are still on people's lips and hearts in worship and prayer all over the world 2000 years later.

Elizabeth's baby growing in her womb for six months is already mature enough to respond bodily to the Holy spirit coming in power on his mother. Those of us who have been blessed with having given birth will know all about unborn babies leaping around in the womb! They definitely do respond to what is going on with their mothers. I once rather foolishly sang in a performance of the Verdi Requiem when I was very pregnant and as the thrilling Opening music of the Dies Irae started up the baby leapt up and almost hit me under the chin! I sat down rather suddenly at that point!

To be childless in our society is a great sadness for those who long for a family but are denied, and to be a single parent is complicated, but thankfully there is no stigma attached to either state. In our society people are proud of their bumps. We try with all the medical means at our disposal to help those who have difficulty conceiving, and support those who are pregnant, but things were very different in first century Palestine. Elizabeth and Zechariah had given up hoping for a child- -and to be childless then was a disgrace. To be pregnant before marriage like Mary was also a disgrace and could well lead to being ostracised and even stoned. Make no mistake, both Elizabeth and Mary would have had a very hard time of it as well as great joy.

We learn that Mary stays with Elizabeth for three months. Pregnancy is a very bonding experience between women and it will doubtless be a very precious time- -a god given time. I should love to be a fly on the wall as they talk and pray together! Mary will be a great help to Elizabeth with her youth and strength as the older woman

enters the later stages of pregnancy. Being present at the birth will help Mary in her turn to know what to expect and how to prepare for her own delivery.

We need to remember that at this time the oppressed Jewish people have been desperately hoping for many, many years for the promises of their prophets of a coming messiah to be fulfilled. Jewish girls may well harbour secret hopes of being the one to be the mother of the messiah. It's definitely a hot topic. But they haven't truly understood the prophecies. When finally Jesus, -the human face of God himself, comes into their lives, many reject him.

In Mary and Elizabeth, God honours humble god-fearing women—very definitely second class citizens in that society, to bring his kingdom to birth. He blesses them richly with his holy spirit because they have open, willing and obedient hearts.

Now it's our turn to go on living out the values of God's kingdom- -topsy turvy values- -valuing the humble- -the marginalised--not in a patronising fashion but from a genuine belief in the equal value of every human being in the loving gaze of God.

This is the kingdom John was born to challenge his compatriots to prepare for, the kingdom Jesus was born to embody in his own life, death and resurrection, and to entrust to those who follow him.

This above all is what we celebrate at Christmastime. And- --awesome thought- - we are now called **to be the body of Christ**, to bring the kingdom to birth for our own generation, to live out the values of god's kingdom with the help and strength of God's Holy Spirit .

Let's hold firmly to that and whatever life throws at us in the coming week and beyond, our Christmas will once again be truly blessed.

Amen.

Carole Lewis