

## Advent 4 – Elizabeth and Mary, The bridging of two worlds

If you had to summarise this morning's Gospel reading, you might say it's about new life within and the bridging of two worlds through their meeting. It is –after all–about two pregnant women; Elizabeth who we imagine as approaching middle age; Mary, little more than a girl. [It sometimes surprises us when we consider it that Mary may have been very young indeed; perhaps in early 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. 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.]

Our passage relates the joyful meeting between Mary and her older relative Elizabeth as together they give thanks for their pregnancies and the divine significance of the children they are to bear. Luke is quite precise, describing a very specific timescale: Mary's pregnancy we can surmise is at a very early stage whilst Elizabeth is some five months more advanced; in verse 36 of this chapter, the Angel had told Mary "And behold, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son and this is the sixth month with her...." Mary then stays with Elizabeth for three months leaving her shortly before the birth of her son.

There is huge importance in this meeting but by being so specific about the time, Luke also conveys its practical significance. Mary must have valued the reassurance and wisdom of the older woman and Mary's company must have been a welcome relief to Elizabeth who, to this point had endured her pregnancy in seclusion (in verse 24 we are told "...and for five months she kept herself hidden") and with a mute husband! The practical reality makes Elizabeth's words especially heartfelt '.....blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfilment of what was spoken to her by the Lord'.

What unfolds through the encounter between the two pregnant women is a fusing together of their stories and the stories of their two sons. One is angelically announced to his father, the other to his mother. One is conceived through a minor miracle and not unknown in the Hebrew scriptures; think of Hannah and Samuel; the other through a unique one. One, as will emerge in the unfolding of their stories, may be senior in age and time but the other will be infinitely senior in status.

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. Did he get this story from Mary herself? After all it would seem that she was part of the early church in Jerusalem. Luke himself tells us so in Acts (1.14). Had Luke, the doctor (and we trust a 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....

But 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?] Mary's song might then have been a well-known song, Hannah's song, that she adapted for her own use. The words - "for behold, from henceforth all generations will call me blessed" was personal to her.

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."

But what is the theological purpose of these stories? What have Christians reasoned from this passage? John's leaping around in his mother's womb is a normal phenomenon of later pregnancy and indeed if you read current ante-natal information sheets, there is a paragraph headed up "baby's movements in pregnancy" in which it describes the feel of a baby's movements in terms of "kicks, flutters, swishes or rolls" and that the pattern of movements provides reassurance of wellbeing. Guidance is given on what action should be taken in the event of a reduction or change in the pattern of movement which not be ignored.

In Elizabeth's case the Church has made more of this movement than Elizabeth could have done. For her, it was a sign that her own son had recognised Jesus, not only as kin, but as Lord. For later generations of Christians that leap of joy came to be the mark of the Holy Spirit at work in John. This pre-natal gracing with the Spirit is the reason Christians celebrate his nativity (on 24 June) rather than his death as his principal feast.

In such theology, meaning accumulates over time. Layers of faith and reason are laid down like deposits of sediment which time turns gradually from sand to stone.

We live 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 in a sense that is what they are: Stories told by people to other people. Stories shaped by communities and passed on.

We cannot know what happened at the first Christmas. That Jesus of Nazareth was born is certain. That Mary was his mother is also 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. That is the Mystery to which the

Christmas stories are pointing. 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. John bridges the gap between the Old Testament world of prophets with a foot in both that world and the New Testament world of the Church.

Sometimes we need to think outside the realm of the familiar to make sense of people who don't fit neatly into our categories. We can see the author of Hebrews using what he knows about sacrifice and priesthood to make sense of how he – a Christian, experienced the death of Christ. We should notice that when the old categories of sacrifice and priesthood are not adequate for the task, he does not reshape Christ to fit the categories. Instead, he redefines the categories to be true to God's Son – as he encountered him then and as we do today.

We all need new life within because new life brings Hope and we all need hope for the future. As we get older, we spend more of our time looking back and this is what sometimes makes Christmas such a bitter/sweet season. There's nothing wrong with looking back but new life is by its very definition, looking 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.

In conclusion may we pray that the “bloom” and the “glow” of God's New Life within may be ours -this Christmas– and into the future and that we may be conscious of the flutters, swishes and rolls of God at work within our very souls. Amen