

Theme: Mary and Elizabeth

St Luke was not only a physician, but he was also an historian, who used written material and eyewitness accounts that had a high degree of credibility to write his history of the events surrounding the life of Jesus, which is contained in his two volumes: his gospel and the book of Acts.

St Paul in his second journey around the Middle East went to Ephesus where it is thought that St. John lived out his life and we know from the crucifixion story that Mary may well have lived with John. Now since Luke travelled with Paul it is quite possible that Luke knew Mary the mother of Jesus and her closest friends and obtained this account of Mary's visit to Elizabeth from Mary herself or from her close friends. If I were to be asked what happened when my eldest daughter was born 53 years ago, in my case, I would say that I remember driving to work in Dunstable and getting a phone call from Jill to say that our baby had started to arrive. And by the time I got back to Wokingham hospital Amanda had been born, so I had to ask Jill about the events of Amanda's birth. In other words, 50 odd years later, I only remember the significant things about the birth of our first child, through Jill, which was also probably true of St Luke with regard to Mary, albeit a bigger gap.

Mary remembered that it was the angel Gabriel who had told her of Elizabeth's pregnancy, indeed who wouldn't have remembered such a thing as that, and that she too would soon be pregnant. But whereas Mary was probably a teenager Elizabeth was in her old age, and it wasn't natural for an old woman to be pregnant, which would also have been why she remembers that so well. She also remembered the journey she made to the hill country of Galilee which would have to be done on foot, another memorable event. So, Mary visited Elizabeth and she recalled to Luke not the details that women normally talk about when one of them is expecting a child, but those things that would never be forgotten. Mary remembered the details that are recorded in our reading from Luke's gospel about Elizabeth being filled with the Holy Spirit, and of the blessing that Elizabeth gave to Mary because she was pregnant.

So, in our reading from St Luke's gospel, we have a snippet of history of the time just before John the Baptist was born and of the time just before Jesus was born. We also know from verse 36, just before our reading, that John the Baptist and Jesus were related and were possibly cousins, or second cousins, and that John was about six months older than Jesus, which makes John the last of the Old Testament prophets.

The first verse of our reading from Luke's gospel says, "In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country." It would be normal for a younger person to visit an older person in a culture, such as Israel, which honoured older people. This would also suggest that Mary didn't yet know she was pregnant before her journey to Elizabeth because an unmarried pregnant girl would be kept in doors out of sight, it wouldn't be safe for her to be seen. A pregnant unmarried girl could be punished by death, we of course know that Mary's pregnancy was through the power of the Holy Spirit, but her neighbours wouldn't have known that.

But this is the story of Mary when she first became aware that she was pregnant with Jesus, which was when she greeted Elizabeth and immediately Elizabeth's baby leapt in her womb. And then Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit which prompted her to say with a loud cry, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb". Elizabeth then says, "Why has this happened to me that the mother of my Lord comes to me?" We need to note the contrast here between Elizabeth's faith and belief in God and Zachariah's unbelief which made him mute, verse 20 just before our reading.

Nowhere can we better see the paradox of blessedness and sorrow than in Mary's life following the birth of her first son. To Mary was granted the blessedness of being the mother of the Son of God; and well might her heart be filled with a wondrous joy at so great a privilege. Yet that very blessedness was to be a sword to pierce her heart, when she saw her son hanging on a cross. It is the same paradox of blessedness and sorrow that mothers throughout the world go through when the baby they brought into the world is taken out of the world before their due season either by famine, disease, or violence.

The truth is that God does not choose people for ease of comfort or selfish joy but for a task that may take all that head and heart and hand can bring to it. Quite recently we were preaching on the saints, and saint Perpetua was called by God to be a witness to Christ, and she gave her life rather than deny him.

Our gospel reading this morning at the 9.30 service was from Luke chapter 1 verses 39 to 56. The first part 39 to 45 was our gospel reading read from the bible and the second part 46 to 56 was the Magnificat which the choir sang as a psalm. Here in the Magnificat, we have a passage from the bible that has become one of the great hymns of the church. It is saturated in the Old Testament; and is especially like Hannah's song of praise in 1 Samuel 2 verses 1-10, where Hannah dedicated Samuel to the Lord. It is from the first verse of Mary's song, "My soul magnifies the Lord" that we get the name Magnificat, and in the following four verses Mary rejoices in God her Saviour, which points to Mary, a relatively young woman, realizing that she needs a Saviour, an important step in her, and everyone's journey of faith.

But she was also clearly amazed that God would choose her for such an honour because of her lowliness and apparent unimportance, but Mary's strength was her humility. Then on reflection Mary now realized that this was not about her but about God, and that God had entrusted her with a very important job to do which would be a blessing to her, although then she had no idea of the sadness, she would one day feel.

Mary's song then speaks about four standards which as Christians we need to take heed of. Firstly, God scatters the proud in their conceit. That's a moral standard. Christianity should be the death of pride, why, because if a man sets his life beside that of Christ it tears the last vestige of pride from him, we can only stand before him in utter humility. And it is no good any of us comparing ourselves with other people, as Christians we are to compare our lives with the life of Jesus, Christ is the only satisfactory Standard for comparison. In my day when I was an engineering apprentice the British standard linear dimension was feet and inches, these days it's metric, the British standard time is Greenwich Mean Time. There is a standard for everything, and our standard of behaviour is Jesus Christ.

Secondly God casts down the mighty from their thrones. That's a social standard. Christianity puts an end to the world's labels and hierarchical systems; we are all God's children and God looks on each of us in the same way. Nowhere is that more vividly demonstrated than when Jesus washed the disciples' feet and told them that no servant is greater than their master. As Christians we must not look down on anyone or judge anyone; we are here to serve not to be served.

Thirdly God has filled the hungry with good things and sent the rich away empty. This saying has nothing to do with money, God loves the righteous whether they are rich or poor. Whereas Mary was referring to the hungry who are filled with good things, Jesus in his sermon on the mount was referring to the same people as "blessed are the poor in spirit", in both cases they are those who stand in total dependence before God, they are those who know that they need God's help, and they hunger and thirst for righteousness. Whereas the rich are those who are only dependent on themselves and don't need help from God who they do not believe in. Their god is materialism, and they are out to amass as much as they can get, and by whatever means, which of course makes a lot of sense to people who believe that this life is all that there is.

Sadly, there is belief and unbelief in most of us, and those who recognize the problem can with prayer and faith in Christ become less dependent on materialism and begin to find joy in a better relationship with Christ. And finally, God has taught us what it is to be merciful, he has given us a standard of mercy, it's the second part of Jesus' great commandment, "Love your neighbour as you love yourself".

There is a loveliness in the Magnificat, but in the loveliness is a challenge, and the challenge is to look at ourselves not in judgment or condemnation, but objectively and by asking Christ, through the Holy Spirit, to help us in those situations where we fall short of his standards.

Mary rushed off to the hill country to see Elizabeth who she knew from the angel to be pregnant, but when she got to Elizabeth's house, she not only had the joy of seeing Elizabeth, but she also had the joy of receiving God's blessing through her, who through the Holy Spirit confirmed that she would be the mother of God's Son.

Revd. John White