

Sunday 22nd December 2024

The Fourth Sunday of Advent

Gospel Reading

Luke 1.39-45[46-55]

Mary Visits Elizabeth

39 In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country, 40 where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. 41 When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leapt in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit 42 and exclaimed with a loud cry, 'Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. 43 And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me? 44 For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leapt for joy. 45 And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfilment of what was spoken to her by the Lord.'

Mary's Song of Praise

46 And Mary said,

'My soul magnifies the Lord,

47 and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour,

48 for he has looked with favour on the lowliness of his servant.

Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed;

49 for the Mighty One has done great things for me,

and holy is his name.

50 His mercy is for those who fear him

from generation to generation.

51 He has shown strength with his arm;

he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.

52 He has brought down the powerful from their thrones,

and lifted up the lowly;

53 he has filled the hungry with good things,

and sent the rich away empty.

54 He has helped his servant Israel,

in remembrance of his mercy,

55 according to the promise he made to our ancestors,

to Abraham and to his descendants for ever.'

Other Readings: Micah 5.2-5a

Canticle: Magnificat or Psalm 80.1-8

Hebrews 10.5-10

Homily

Little would be thought of it in 21st century Britain, but 2000 years ago in Galilee it was scandalous. She, a young teenage girl, was to marry the local carpenter - a skilled craftsman respected in the local community. Their parents had agreed to it and they were now betrothed. The agreement was binding. But before the wedding could take place, she fell pregnant. In the tight-knit community of Nazareth 2000 years ago, tongues would surely wag.

Perhaps she kept it quiet for as long as possible, for who would believe her story that she was carrying God's own son? She did tell her husband to be, and he was in his rights to break off the marriage and condemn her to the life of an outcast: an unmarried mother living on the margins of society. But he did not. He believed her, for he, too, had received a message from God. Mary was bearing God's own son, and he, Joseph, would not abandon her. But in believing Mary and keeping faith in God, he opened himself up to ridicule and those same wagging tongues spreading ill-informed rumours behind their backs as to who the father really was.

Here was a couple who put their trust in God and together were prepared to brave what others would see as both shameful and scandalous: a child conceived out of wedlock. And it was to this couple that God entrusted his own son, the son whom he was sending to save humankind from sin and death.

Perhaps it was to delay the time when people would notice her bulging waistline that Mary headed off to see her relative Elizabeth who, despite her advanced age, was also pregnant. Mary could care for Elizabeth in the latter stages of her pregnancy, and Elizabeth could comfort Mary and prepare her for the inevitable public shame when she returned home, no longer able to hide her pregnancy. They were there for each other, each helping the other as they sought to live out God's calling, and that prompted Mary to sing out in the Magnificat's great hymn of praise.

Amidst the splendour of the season and the beauty of words such as the Magnificat, it is easy to overlook the pain and hardship of what Mary and Joseph endured. For the scandal of Mary's pregnancy was just the tip of the iceberg. They lived in an occupied country and were ruled over by a puppet tyrant king installed by the Romans. As the time approached for Mary to give birth they were forced to make the long journey to Bethlehem. The only shelter they could find there was a cattle shed that they had to share with the animals. It was there that the child was born. And it was from there that they soon had to flee to escape Herod's threat to the child's life. If we overlook those real hardships they endured, we also miss the vital importance of the help they received from such as Elizabeth, their reliance on one another and, above all, their trust in God and his word to them. God had spoken to them both, telling them that the child Mary was carrying was his own son. To many that would sound ridiculous and implausible. But not to Mary and Joseph. They took God at his word and were obedient to him. And God did not let them down; he sustained and carried them through all that they had to endure.

So, what do we take away from this? That God calls us to have faith in him, no matter how ridiculous it may seem to others, no matter how much others may dismiss it, no matter how shameful or even scandalous it may seem to others that we might dare to believe in him. In that faith God calls us to care for one another, to support one another, to build one another up in faith. In that faith God also calls us to be obedient to him, no matter how implausible or impossible it may seem that we could do whatever it is he is asking of us. And, in return, he brings strength to us through his Holy Spirit alive within us. He guides us, supports us,

and equips us to endure and succeed in all that he asks of us. Above all, God sends his son to us, his son who dies and rises for us, claims us as his own, and never abandons us.

Conversation Questions

1. In the Magnificat, Mary recognises that God “the Mighty One has done great things for me”. What great things has God done for you?
2. In being faithful to God, what challenges have you faced and how has God helped you endure them?
3. Is there anything else from the passage not already discussed that speaks to you? What is it?
4. What will you do this week in your Monday-to-Saturday ministry in response to what you have heard today? #everydayfaith

Prayer

Spend some time in prayer, responding to what you have heard today and listening to what God might be saying to you.

Collect of the day

*God our redeemer,
who prepared the Blessed Virgin Mary
to be the mother of your Son:
grant that, as she looked for his coming as our saviour,
so we may be ready to greet him
when he comes again as our judge;
who is alive and reigns with you,
in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
one God, now and for ever.*

(or)

*Eternal God,
as Mary waited for the birth of your Son,
so we wait for his coming in glory;
bring us through the birth pangs of this present age
to see, with her, our great salvation
in Jesus Christ our Lord.*

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