

Visitation of Mary to Elizabeth

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Introduction

Today's text is an iconic advent text, foretelling the birth of Jesus, and 'telling out' about the greatness of God. It is also the story of two women who recognise the ways in which their lives, and those of their children, are inextricably linked. In our inter-webbed world, where we can each 'fore-tell' on multiple devices simultaneously, and where our actions have a direct bearing on the lives of our unborn children tomorrow, these are prophetic verses not just for advent, but for all time.

Text

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

"My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour, for he has looked with favour on the lowliness of his servant. Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed; for the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name. His mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation. He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty. He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy, according to the promise he made to our ancestors, to Abraham and to his descendants forever."

And Mary remained with her about three months and then returned to her home. Now the time came for Elizabeth to give birth, and she bore a son.

Comment

One of the many astonishing things about the gospel stories is the prominence of

the voice and experience of women at times of change. In the social context where women's voices typically were 'trumped' by those of men, even more astonishing than that a woman should bear God's child; a woman anoint the messiah; women be welcomed as part of Jesus's core team; a woman discover the empty tomb.

I met Sarah when she came to us for support in a situation of conflict. For the first two meetings with us we had to coax her story out of her – she was anxious, nervous, ashamed of the 'mess' for which she felt responsible. Sarah told us how, in the face of power and authority in her church, she felt unable to speak, and when she did so, she felt her voice was thwarted. She shared the experience we've heard from others that a suggestion she would make in a meeting would be ignored, while the same suggestion made by someone seemingly more powerful (often but not always by a man) was welcomed as wisdom.

It was only in our second meeting that Sarah opened up about her past life. She had recently retired from her role as CEO in a local business. In this role she had led a 'failing' company through a process of change and transformation into a flourishing, self-confident community of successful managers and workers across a range of social groupings. She led team meetings with confidence, and inspired new recruits, creating a sense of belonging in the community. This woman who had been recognised as a gifted secular leader felt unable to exercise these gifts within her ecclesial community.

There may have been multiple reasons for Sarah's voice being silenced. What we did notice, and notice in other situations, is that quite often the context of church can inhibit some women from finding their voice. Not always. And not all women. But there is a pattern of women losing their voice in times of tension, and it is a pattern that is repeated.

Our passage today shares the extraordinarily powerful voice of a woman as she cradles a holy child, and takes her place within her community. From within this space she is able to articulate with utter clarity both the immanence of God in God's care for the ordinary folk, and the transcendence of God in the power of love to overcome evil.

It is by the hands, and through the words of such women, and men, that all conflict and war will be transcended now and always.

Response

Mary was an unlikely prophet of her time. Who are the unlikely prophets in your midst? In what contexts do you experience your voice being ignored? In what contexts do you notice that your voice is given more weight than it potentially deserves? Who's are the voices within your community, and within your church that are consistently being ignored or belittled? What will you do about this?

Prayer

Loving God of the small, and of the strong,
we pray for balanced power
in our churches

and in our world.

We pray for communities
where unlikely voices are given space
and familiar voices fade;
where the strong step back
and the shy step up.

Give the courage to speak
to those who feel their voice has been trampled.
Give the grace to remain quiet
to those who know their voice has been heard.

And in and through all of this,
may we remain alert to the voice of your spirit,
dancing between and within each one.

Amen.