

Visitation of Mary to Elizabeth

26.05.2020
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Introduction

Luke's Gospel begins with two angelic annunciations of special conceptions, two announced births and the return to the Temple of the child Jesus. Echoing the story of the birth of Samuel who anointed David king of Israel. This time it was not David's rule that was been prepared for, but the rule of God, the central theme of John the Baptist and Jesus' teaching. This decisive divine action is the prelude to the nativity. So today, at the correct distance from Christmas, two pregnant women meet together and are mutually blessed. As Mary embellishes Hannah's response to the news of Samuel's birth (1 Samuel 2:1-10 2:1), a central theme of all conflict is addressed – problems related to the imbalance of power.

We cannot ignore the plight of the poor without damaging the image of God within ourselves.

Text

Luke 1:39-57

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 leapt 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 leapt 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 for ever.' And Mary remained with her for about three months and then returned to her home. The Birth of John the Baptist Now the time came for Elizabeth to give birth, and she bore a son.

Comment

Almost by definition, real or perceived imbalances of power lie at the heart of conflict. Some sort of grievance, unfairness, some demand that things must change often leads us into dispute. Often our conflicts arise from our self-centredness, pride, greed and the rest. But the demand for change is a Godly thing if it addresses issues of injustice, exploitation and oppression, the occasions where relationships rub resulting in horror and hurt.

The political context of Jesus birth was highly contentious. In 4BCE there was a Jewish rebellion against the Roman authorities and the town of Sepphoris in Galilee was burnt with many of its inhabitants killed, raped or enslaved. Sepphoris is just 4 miles from Nazareth, Jesus' home as a child. Life was uncertain and fearful; nothing could be done about the powerful occupying force of the Roman Empire.

This is the context for the meeting between two pregnant women. The voice of such women is not usually heard, but Elizabeth and Mary here are chosen to set the scene for God's mighty act of deliverance, to be heralded by John the Baptist and proclaimed by Jesus, the establishment of God's Rule.

The Meeting of Mary and Elizabeth

If John the Baptist was the person to announce the coming of Jesus, John's mother, Elizabeth is the announcer that Mary was pregnant with 'her Lord'. Was Mary's pregnancy visible, maybe not. This is a very human encounter. Mary set off in 'haste' to see her relative Elizabeth, just as any young expectant mother would seek out a trusted relative with whom to share her news. But Mary's situation was compromised. She was pregnant and not married and in the eyes of society would have been a disgrace. The joyful response of Elizabeth, recognising that the baby that Mary would give birth to was in fact her 'Lord', must have affirmed Mary in her decision to be the mother of Jesus. Elizabeth gives her the highest possible praise, saying that she would be "blessed", held in praise and high regard, for all time, just as Jesus would be honoured in the same way. But also 'happy' (a different Greek word used here for 'blessed') that she believed that what God promised would be fulfilled and God had chosen her, a young girl of low social rank and stigmatised socially, to achieve God's purposes. This was the first reversal that would be revealed in the coming of God's Kingdom in Jesus.

The Magnificat

Mary's Song, the Magnificat, bears a close resemblance to the song Hannah sang on the birth of her son, the prophet Samuel. Both are very close to the sentiments of Psalm 113. They are songs of praise from the perspective of the weak, the poor, the marginalised and oppressed. God in His strength, addresses the unjust imbalance of power when those in control undermine the humanity of those they consider weak.

This is a song of comfort and hope for the marginalized no wonder the Magnificat and the many hymns based upon it are sung regularly in many Churches.

This is a song of challenge to the social and political order. This song is highly subversive of the status quo. The powerful are depended upon to hold together the social order. In return they are given privileges and rights denied to lesser mortals.

The world's economy is constructed around the power of the 'haves'. Those who lack economic power are disregarded. The reversal is explicit, God has:

‘scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts’

‘brought down the powerful from their thrones’

‘lifted up the lowly’

‘filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty’

God kept his promise to Abraham, that his descendants would be transformed from hopelessness to being a source of blessing for all nations.

It is unlikely, if we have anything to do with it, that power will ever be distributed equally. What this passage challenges is the way those in power use their advantage the fact that some are allowed to grow rich, at the expense of others who are driven to poverty. Some have all while others are neglected.

Each person has dignity by virtue of being made in the image of God. We cannot ignore their poverty without damaging the image of God within ourselves. This radical message is the story that followers of Jesus live by. It challenges the systems of power, commerce and influence of this world and demands a reversal. This is the Good News that we are called to proclaim. But Good News for whom?

Response

Mary’s response was to draw on Hannah’s song (and perhaps Psalm 113). Most people inhabit the theology of the songs and hymns they sing. What hymns are important to you and why?

Is it true that resolving conflict involves addressing power imbalances?

What does it mean to ‘love’ in Jesus teaching? How do the ‘powerful’ love?

In your unique circumstances, how can you live the Magnificat following the pattern of God’s action for the poor? Is this impossible idealism?

Prayer

God of hope and power,
who has taught us that faith can remove mountains,
as we observe our unjust systems
and how we collude with them,

liberate us from the idolatry
that believes the powerful
are beyond your transformation.

May your love motivate our actions

to be agents of reconciliation
in your world. **Amen**

Season: Ordinary time

Themes: Justice