

Mary and Elizabeth

... God looks with favour on His servants

A reflection given on the Fourth Sunday of Advent, 19th December 2021 by the Associate Vicar the Revd Wendy Wale in Beverley Minster

Micah 5:2-5a; Luke 1:39-55

The fourth Sunday of Advent is all about Mary and her cousin Elizabeth, and I just happen to have a cousin who is called Mary Elizabeth - this is genuinely true. And as I don't have a sister, she is the closest thing I have to one, and we've shared a lot of life together. And I can remember phoning her up one day and quite out of the blue saying to her, "You're pregnant, aren't you?" To which there was a fairly stunned silence. And then she replied with astonishment, "Well, yes, but nobody knows. It's only weeks. How did you know?" Well, I have literally no idea how I knew: cousins, sisters are close in a way that you can't explain. And our reading today is also about female cousins, widely different in age, but both pregnant and sharing their stories and quite incredible stories.

Mary and Elizabeth and the joyful sound of Mary's song, 'My Soul Magnifies the Lord.' It's a beautiful story, interwoven with many other stories, against the backdrop of the great story of God's people Israel: there's the story of Elizabeth who is about to bear a child despite her age and her previous inability to conceive; there's the story of the young Mary, whose unborn child is also unexpected and unplanned by his mother; then there's the story of John, born to be the messenger, spoken of by the Prophet Isaiah, who would prepare the way of the Lord; and the story of Jesus born to be the Lord whose coming has been long foretold by the prophets of Israel, as we heard in our first reading; then there are the stories of Zechariah and Joseph, the men and fathers who fade into the background as John and Jesus follow their own destiny. Zechariah is silenced for the whole of Elizabeth's pregnancy because these are women's stories. If you don't know all the stories I've just been mentioning, they're really worth reading, each one of them a drama in their own right.

But today our story centres on these two mothers, cousins who have such different experiences of bearing sons, but who both know that these sons are destined in some way to fulfil God's purposes for his people. We never get to know if Elizabeth lived to hear John's voice crying out in the wilderness, or to suffer the terrible loss of

her son, who was brutally murdered on Herod's orders. We do know that Mary lived to see Jesus dying on the cross, to feel the sword pierce her heart, but to also know the joy of his birth into a new resurrection life.

Today is just about the joy, the excitement and the awe of two women whose children, it seems, already knew each other; two women whose faith had led them to say yes to God. All generations will call them blessed. And we are one of those generations - so what does this story mean for us today?

Mary and Elizabeth hold within their bodies and within their hearts and minds, God's promise of new life, of justice and of mercy. If ever there was a time in this world when we needed that new life, justice and mercy, then surely it is now. Although perhaps every generation thinks like that. And perhaps it is in every generation that God looks for the people who will say 'YES' to His plans; who will carry themselves in the light of Christ, seeking to shine it into the dark places of the world.

We could listen to the familiar stories of Christmas - some of us will be listening to a lot of them over the next few days and perhaps not get too involved in them - let them wash over - white noise. Or perhaps we could say 'YES' to God and become part of those stories, part of the bigger story of God's people, the light carried from generation to generation.

God may not be asking us to lead his people out of slavery or to bear a child for him, but he might ask us to do something which could be as difficult for us: He might ask us to be more loving in our lives; He might ask us to think before we condemn people who are different from us, to seek to really listen to their stories; He might ask us to think before we shut someone out of our lives and to seek reconciliation and understanding; He might invite us to think before we assume the worst of people, to seek to listen, to learn and to value; He might ask us to think before we criticise and judge, to seek to find ways to offer praise and encouragement instead; He may be asking me asking you to pray for the needs of others and then to be part of God's answer to that prayer.

Only I know in my heart what God is asking of me this Advent and Christmas, and only you can know what he is asking of you.

But what Mary tells us today, which remains true, is that he looks with favour on the lowliness of his servants; that His mercy is for those who fear him and he remembers his mercy; and that he fulfils the promises he makes.

So I hope and pray that when we say 'YES', even in the tiniest way, and perhaps because we say 'YES' to whatever God is asking of us, we will also be able to say with Mary, *"My soul magnifies the Lord for the mighty one has done great things for me and Holy is his name"*

Reading Texts

Micah 5:2-5a

² But you, O Bethlehem of Ephrathah, who are one of the little clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to rule in Israel, whose origin is from of old, from ancient days. ³ Therefore he shall give them up until the time when she who is in labour has brought forth; then the rest of his kindred shall return to the people of Israel. ⁴ And he shall stand and feed his flock in the strength of the Lord, in the majesty of the name of the Lord his God. And they shall live secure, for now he shall be great to the ends of the earth; ⁵ and he shall be the one of peace.

Luke 1:39-55

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 leaped 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 leaped for joy. ⁴⁵ And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfilment of what was spoken to her by the Lord." 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 forever."