

Sermon Sunday 23rd December 2018 Micah 5 2-5a; Hebrews 10 5-10; Luke 1 39-45 (46-55)

Our gospel reading today brings the Advent season to a close with Mary and Elizabeth rejoicing in their respective pregnancies. Luke makes many pairings like the one between Mary and Elizabeth, to help us understand the events that surround Jesus' birth.

It is the younger women, Mary, who travels to her relative Elizabeth, prefiguring Mary and Joseph's later journey to Bethlehem. The two women are kin and tradition holds that Mary and Elizabeth are cousins. Elizabeth is the wife of the temple priest, Zechariah. We know already that an angel appears to Zechariah and announces that Elizabeth will have a son, who is to be called John. Mary also, has a revelation from an angel, and is carrying the baby Jesus. So here are two pregnant women ministering to each other, reflecting on their understanding of God's purpose for both their lives, and those of their unborn children.

People often depict both women, but especially Mary, as naive and uneducated. But I have no doubt that *both* women are aware of what is happening to them and relate to these events from the depths of their relationship with God. The women embrace their fates, as they embrace each other, out of a strength of faith, knowledge of scripture, and love for God.

Both women understand the import of their circumstances. Elizabeth is filled with the Holy Spirit and blesses Mary with a prophecy: 'Blessed are you among women, blessed is the fruit of your womb, and blessed are you, Mary, for *believing what is spoken to you*, by God.

Elizabeth's blessing describes Mary's baby as *spoken by God*, which is a deliberate play on words. Jesus, the Son of God, appears in the Incarnation as part of creation; a human being, *spoken into the world*, by God, in the same way that all of creation is spoken into existence by God. Elizabeth's blessing is both a recalling of the creation story, but also for us, reading the gospel story in the fullness of time, a symbol of the *new creation* which we will become, in the birth of Jesus.

Mary also, knows her scripture well. She responds to Elizabeth with a poem of praise which takes inspiration from the song of Hannah in the Old Testament (1 Sam. 2: 1-10). But Mary *reinterprets* Hannah's song in a new and powerful way. She turns the song into a prophecy that proclaims how God will mercifully redeem Israel, according to the promises God made to Abraham and Abraham's descendants. Mary's song reminds us that God's covenant to Israel, and later, to the world, is fulfilled in the coming of Jesus.

So here we have two educated, literate, and spiritual women conversing about God. Mary and Elizabeth know God's word so well that it springs forth from them in hymns of praise and prophecy. It should come as no surprise that God chooses these women to do God's work. When the time arrives for God's promises to be fulfilled, these women are already equipped through a lifetime of faithful study and worship. They do God's will, through the Holy Spirit, because they know God, and God knows them; they love God and God loves them; and because of their lives of faith, Mary and Elizabeth understand God's promises and do what God asks them to do.

When God's call comes, these women are more than ready.

For us too, Advent is a time of anticipation, a time to get ready for God's promises to be fulfilled. Traditionally, Advent is a season of fasting, like Lent; a time when we clean out and renew our spiritual cupboards. Like Lent, the liturgical colour for Advent is purple, a colour of mourning and reflection, which is replaced in a glorious flash of white at Christmas, when we celebrate the saving light, brought to us by Jesus' birth.

Unfortunately, Advent these days seems to be more about getting food ready, or buying presents, than reflecting on God's purposes and promises for humanity. But perhaps in the midst of the chaos that we often turn Advent into, we can stop and reflect for a while on Mary and Elizabeth; two wise women who point us to the real purpose of our preparations. They remind us that we too, should make room in our hearts and make our lives ready to greet the child, soon to be born in Bethlehem, who is Saviour of us all.

Amen.