

Sunday 22nd December – Advent 4 – Luke 1:39-55 ‘A New Song’

Shared experience is a powerful thing. So much of what binds us together as humans lies in what we can share – in a sense, we were made for it. It is particularly powerful when people who have experienced similar challenges or opportunities find comfort and inspiration in each other.

In today's passage we see such a meeting. Mary 'hurries' to see Elizabeth, and although they find themselves at opposite ends of their journey in life – one is very young, the other very old – they find themselves in the same unusual situation: that of an unexpected pregnancy, and the enormous life-changes that will bring.

One senses that this is the main reason for Mary to visit Elizabeth. Whilst it would be common for relatives – especially female relatives – to pay their respects upon hearing of a new pregnancy, Mary needs to go somewhere, anywhere, that she feels safe, where she can share all her deepest hopes and fears with someone who gets it, who understands.

And there is a good deal of healing in this encounter. Elizabeth already seems joyfully reconciled to her new reality, praising God as early as v25 of Luke's narrative. However, Mary's position is more ambiguous. When the angel first visits, she is 'greatly troubled' (v29). By the end of the encounter, she shows remarkable faith and composure in receiving and believing the angel's word (v38), but her emotions are veiled – at least not that Luke records. **It is only in the company of this wise old mentor and friend that she is finally able truly to embrace her calling, and to burst out in a song of great joy** – now known to us as the Magnificat. More on that in a moment.

It is surely significant that Elizabeth's first words to Mary are 'Blessed are you...!' It might have been the first time that Mary heard it put like that. The Messiah would bless the world, of course – but bless *her*? It probably didn't feel like 'blessing' at that moment: the scandal, the disgrace, the fear for her own and her family's safety. **Elizabeth's divinely inspired utterance enables her to see it in a new light – God was blessing her, too.**

Perhaps we too have faced – or are facing – great challenges, and have wondered where God is in the midst of it. It is hard to cling on to faith and trust in those times. And we may never get a complete answer this side of heaven. But today's story encourages us to dare to hope that, somehow, God *is* in what we face, and that he can bring good out of it.

And let's also be inspired by Mary's song of praise in response – with that great realisation that this extraordinary turn of events really was an extraordinary blessing, Mary now pours out her heart in extraordinary praise. The song is known as the Magnificat – taken from the opening line 'my soul magnifies the Lord'. As spontaneous songs go, it's pretty good. Have you ever managed a spontaneous song? Me neither – but this one was worth recording! And it tells us three simple, but amazing, things about God:

First, God is MINDFUL: (v48) 'he has been mindful of the humble state of his servant.' God notices things. We look at the mess of our world and we may be tempted to wonder if God knows what is going on. Or maybe our own life has difficult stuff in it – does God know about it? Does he notice? Is he mindful? Yes, he is. God notices. He knows - he knows all about us.

For Mary, God noticed her humility, her lowly circumstances, and she praised him for it. And make no mistake – God knows your situation too.

There's a lot of talk about mindfulness nowadays – and there's definitely value in it. But today reminds us that perhaps what matters more is not our mindfulness of things, but God's mindfulness of us. It makes a huge difference to me to know that God *knows*, he is mindful of what I face. Perhaps that's a message you need to hear today.

Second, God is MERCIFUL: (v50) 'His mercy extends to those who fear him, from generation to generation.' Even more important than the fact that God knows, is that he cares – he is merciful. Our situations matter to him. He is patient with our foul-ups – as the verse says, God can be patient over a long period of time – 'his mercy extends from generation to generation'.

Israel's history was one long series of failures. Yes, there were periods of obedience – but also much longer periods of disobedience, idolatry, or full-blown godlessness. Has God given up on them completely? No. His mercy extends from generation to generation.

And God hasn't given up on you either. He not only knows your situation, he cares. His mercy is for all of us, in every generation. No human life is beyond repair, is beyond his mercy. Perhaps that's a message you need to hear today: God has not given up on you.

Finally, God is MIGHTY: (v49) 'the Mighty One has done great things for me – holy is his name.' God knows, he cares – but can he do anything about it? YES. Just like the old Snap song goes (and I love my pop from the 90s): he's got the power. God's people have seen it in history: (vv51-53) 'He has filled the hungry with good things but has sent the rich away empty. He has helped his servant Israel, remembering to be merciful to Abraham and his descendants for ever, just as he promised our ancestors.'

God is very much at work in this world. Empires get overthrown, the ruthless get their come-uppance. For all the evil, good eventually prevails – again and again.

And how does he do it? In this little baby lying in the manger. All that power crammed into one little soul. Like an atomic bomb – all that power, held in one small thing.

Note the theme of *reversal*, too. Who will God exercise this power *for*? For the weak, for the poor, for the humble. Rome doesn't get the new baby, or Athens or even Jerusalem – but Bethlehem. A small market town. The great reversal begins.

And that's good news for us too. You may feel you're vulnerable, at the mercy of forces outside your control. God knows, he cares – and he has the power to change things, if only we'll ask him. But a word of caution: he does it for the humble. He won't give us things that will make us proud, or, worse, forget all about him. God's power is made perfect in weakness. He fills those who are hungry for him with good things, but sends the rich, the self-satisfied, away empty.

So, what is God like? He is mindful, merciful and mighty. He knows, he cares, and he can do something about it, too. And that same God who blessed Mary longs to bless us today, if only we'll let him. **May God grant us all grace to trust him, our mindful, merciful and mighty Lord.**

And may we also respond, like Mary, with extravagant praise: 'My soul magnifies the Lord. My spirit rejoices in God my Saviour.' Let's praise God this Christmas, that he came into our world, that he changed it, and that he is still in the business of changing lives. Amen.