

ANGLICAN CHAPLAINCY OF ALL SAINTS' MARSEILLE

WITH AIX-EN-PROVENCE AND THE LUBERON

Sermon – Fourth Sunday of Advent – 19th December 2021

All Saints' Marseille

The Revd Jamie Johnston, Chaplain

The more you explore Luke's account of the life of Jesus, the better it gets. On this fourth Sunday of Advent, our liturgy invites us to focus on the figure of Mary as we prepare for the coming of Christ. We will hear more of Luke's writing at Christmas, for some of the most beautiful things ever written about the incarnation are found in its opening pages.

Luke's language was of a different standard from the others, the structuring of his story more sophisticated. It's true not least of the first two chapters, which are like a unit in themselves. The whole story begins in the temple, with Zechariah encountering an angel who tells him that his wife Elizabeth will bear a son, John the Baptist, who will be 'filled with the Holy Spirit', 'even before his birth'. The Gospel ends, too, in the temple, when after the Ascension Jesus's followers are described as being continually in the temple, praising God.

The first two chapters of Luke's Gospel are full of pairs. Pairs of people waiting. Mary and Joseph, waiting for the fulfilment of the archangel Gabriel's prophecy. Zechariah and Elizabeth, 'getting on in years', waiting now for the fulfilment of their angel's prophecy and the arrival of their son John. And later Simeon and

Anna, who have been waiting longer than all of them for the 'consolation of Israel', finally seeing it fulfilled when Jesus is presented in the temple.

The events are paired too. First we hear the foretelling of the birth of John, followed by the foretelling of the birth of Jesus. Next we are told of the birth of John, followed by the birth of Jesus. Then we have Jesus presented in the temple after forty days (when Simeon and Anna proclaim his significance), and finally in the temple again at the age of twelve, when he stays behind questioning the teachers.

Each of those mini-narratives is a pair. But in between the foretelling of the birth of Jesus and the birth of John comes the passage we heard in our Gospel reading today, which combines the two stories – it's the point where the stories of John and Jesus intersect. Six episodes in pairs, then this seventh that joins them together. Numbers are never insignificant in the Bible – seven was the number of perfection.

It's a very significant moment. Elizabeth with John the Baptist leaping in her womb - 'filled with the Holy Spirit', Zechariah was told, 'even before his birth'. There's an echo there of King David dancing before the ark of the covenant, the most sacred and precious artefact of ancient Israel that contained the Ten Commandments, the word of God. Here, John dances before the Word made flesh.

Scripture is like a diamond. If you look at it from a new angle, you often see a flash of meaning you hadn't noticed before, something that increases your understanding of the things of God and what it means to be human. This

encounter between the two women near the beginning of Luke's Gospel is filled with layers of meaning. Have you noticed how in these opening chapters it is the women who are active and articulate? Joseph is more or less silent, and Zechariah's ability to speak is taken away until after John is born? The men don't say a lot; the women have a lot to say. That was radical for its time.

There is a profoundly moving aspect to Mary's journey to see her older relative. Mary was young, and finding companionship with Elizabeth at such a vulnerable time would have been transformative. Elizabeth is instantly affirming of her, in a way that few in Mary's community would have been about her unexpected pregnancy: 'Blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfilment of what was spoken to her by the Lord.' Her words release Mary's own song of joy, the Magnificat: 'My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour.'

The solidarity shown by Elizabeth to Mary points the way to how their sons will support one another some thirty years later. It's also a pointer to how sharing a profoundly human experience with another person is an analogy of how we share our most profound human experience with God. The visitation of Mary to Elizabeth has also been called the first example of the type of community to which the church is called. One where outsiders are brought in, those at risk of rejection given welcome and affirmation. A radical, inclusive community that points to an order of things that is often the opposite of what the world expects, which Jesus called the Kingdom of God.

We also notice how one out of each of the pairs waiting sings a song, which form the canticles we say at Morning, Evening and Night Prayer: Zechariah's

Benedictus, Mary's Magnificat and Simeon's Nunc Dimittis. There are echoes in all three canticles of earlier songs in the scriptures. Mary's, in particular has overlaps with Hannah's Song of Praise after she brings her longed for child Samuel to the temple, singing: 'My heart exults in the Lord' and 'the Lord makes poor and makes rich'.

Mary's song, too, is multi-layered. It's about both the sovereignty of God and the transformative power of the incarnation, which puts down the mighty from their seat and exalts the humble and meek. Despite all the machinations of the powers that be – imperial Rome's insistence on a census in the middle of winter – the story of the coming of Jesus subverts them. Mary is the humble and meek who ends up doing the most powerful thing in the history of the world. And, above all, God is the mighty who becomes humble and meek and overturns the world order.

All three songs show how, in their waiting, Zechariah, Mary and Simeon were able to see beyond the events in front of them to understand their deeper significance. They could see that the events surrounding Jesus's birth heralded a new future in which the poor and lowly would find hope and God's people their redemption. They began to understand that God's future had already begun to break into the world. It is the kind of vision that Advent, as it draws to a close, encourages us to capture, so that in our waiting we might begin to see the world more in the way that God sees it.

It's a good way of preparing for Christmas, especially this year. We are living through troubled times, and we might wonder where the future is taking us. We might ask how we are to sing a new song. But living through times of uncertainty

is all the more a call to reflect on and be grateful for the inner riches and strength God has granted his people over centuries of Christian history. It is all the more a call to enter into the silence and faithfulness of Mary, to share more fully in her response of love, so that the new may come to birth in us as it came to birth in her.

For the mystery of Mary's expectant waiting, which we reflect on today, is the mystery of the Incarnation we will celebrate at Christmas. The mystery of the true calling and dignity of human life, our own and everyone else's. This life is possible now, breaking into our living and loving. Jesus called it the Kingdom of God. And came to inhabit it at Bethlehem.

Amen.