

Advent 4 2018

Mic. 5:2-5a; Heb 10:5-10; Lk 1: 39-45.

In preparation for writing this sermon, I opened up Jane Williams' *Lectionary Reflections*, only to be greeted with her opening words, "The readings from Micah and Hebrews are so dauntingly obscure that it is tempting simply to concentrate on the lovely passage from Luke." (Year C p.8). Not a very encouraging start. So I took this as a hint, and started by looking at our Gospel reading.

It is a beautiful story of the two mothers-to-be mutually supporting each other in their extraordinary pregnancies. But let's not get sentimental about it. Just before today's story, Luke tells us about the angel's visitation to John the Baptist's father, Zechariah. He and Elizabeth had just about given up hope of ever having a child as they got older, just like Sarah and Abraham, and the angel came and told him: "Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you will name him John. You will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth, for he will be great in the sight of the Lord. Even before his birth he will be filled with the Holy Spirit ... he will turn many of the people to the Lord their God ... he will go before him..." (Lk 1:13b-17a). So the angel has really talked up the future of this potential son, and given him a pretty lofty job description. One can imagine the conversation when Zechariah got home from Temple duty and told Elizabeth all about it, whether they might not even have wondered whether he might be the messiah, the expected one.

But then her cousin Mary comes to visit, and straight away, whatever Elizabeth was thinking, her son in the womb recognised the greatness of the son Mary was carrying, and leapt in her womb as a sign. As the angel said of John, he would be filled with the Holy Spirit before he was born, and already he knows his role vis-à-vis Jesus, his Lord. And Elizabeth follows his lead, acknowledging her cousin Mary as the "mother of my lord."

I want to explore the next words Elizabeth speaks a little more. She says, "And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord." (Lk 1: 45). Of course Mary is not the only one who believed in this story. Elizabeth could have said the same about herself.

Often in our devotions, we are encouraged to get alongside Mary and pray with her, "Let it be with me according to your word." (Lk 1: 38). And that is a magnificent prayer, of course. But what about our believing in the fulfillment of what God promises us, what God speaks to us. To truly believe, which actually means that our lives reflect this belief.

Well you might say that God hasn't spoken to you, and I guess in the way of angel visits to Zechariah and Mary and their spoken word, maybe not.

But God speaks to us in many ways, never the less. If we have ears to hear! Every year we hear the same story of Mary's faithfulness and trust in God, to such an extent that she could agree to go along with God's plan of her pregnancy and giving birth to Jesus, the Son of God. But what does it mean to really believe in the fulfillment of that word? Well, obviously, Jesus is born, and you know the rest of that story, but what does it mean in our lives that Jesus was born of Mary? So do we have an Elizabethan response – perhaps not babes leaping in our wombs – but something of the sort of visceral excitement?

Because if we really believe in this stuff, in the fulfillment of this word, then we can expect great things to develop in our lives. For a start, it will affect how much we allow God into our lives, whether we still try and run our own lives, or allow God to run them for us, for example. I read of a great prayer a few days ago, which went like this: "It's okay, God, I've got this covered!" A far cry from the collect which starts, "Go before us, O Lord, in all our doings ..."

Neither of these women would have amounted to much, as our society judges, without the fulfillment of those promises from God. And I'm very sure both mothers would have wished for different endings to their son's lives. But they trusted God, that God would bring fulness and richness to the seemingly not much.

The readings from Micah and Hebrews actually address the great care and planning involved in God's long-term outcomes. While Micah might have thought that the prophecy about Bethlehem had already been fulfilled in David, nevertheless he faithfully records this prophecy, not realising how it would come into play, but trusting God's word anyway. And sure enough, it was important for Jesus' birth and credentialing of him, as it were.

Then the author of Hebrews quotes a verse from Psalm 40 which he relates to the messiah, and in this case, to Jesus. David, the alleged author of the psalms, acknowledges that sacrifices were a necessary part of their relating to God in the past, but something new will come, and Hebrews relates this to Jesus, who, like Mary, is about doing God's will. "Then I said, Here I am; ... I delight to do your will." (Ps 40:7-8).

So as we approach the re-membling of the mystery of God's taking on our human flesh and literally, "pitching his tent among us", it's worth thinking about the model these women give us. The one selflessly looking beyond herself to the greatness of what she sees before her, and the other being totally open and accepting of what God asks of her. And look what God can do!

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