

Luke 1.39-45
1st December 2024
Advent 1

You are not alone

Welcome to the Church's New Year's Day, Advent Sunday and the beginning a new Liturgical Year when most of our sermons will come from Luke's Gospel.

We start today by once again meeting Elizabeth and Mary, cousins joined together at the beginning of the Christian story, the mothers of John the Baptist and Jesus of Nazareth. We might even think of them as the first two Christians, at a moment in history when there were no others!

One is old, the other young. Mary lives up north in the Galilean region at Nazareth, whilst Elizabeth, described as living in the hill country, was probably located near Jerusalem because her husband Zachariah served at the Temple.

And Mary makes this journey south twice, at the start and end of her pregnancy. Today you can drive from Nazareth to Bethlehem or Jerusalem, a journey of about 90 miles, in two and half hours, probably along the coastal road via Tel Aviv. In Mary's day it was a four-day journey on foot and to think she did it four times, walking there and back twice, is something that a slow and short walker like me finds utterly remarkable.

So, across the centuries, where do we find the sacredness in the stories of Elizabeth, whose name in Hebrew means *My God is abundance*, and Mary, whose name is Egyptian in origin and in Hebrew means, *Beloved*.

Well, the first thing I note this morning, is that like every woman carrying a child Elizabeth and Mary knew a thing or two about waiting. By today's passage Elizabeth is now six months into her pregnancy, Mary at the beginning of hers, and she will stay with her cousin for the last three months of Elizabeth's term.

I suspect there will be many sermons and retreats this Advent season that will pick up the theme of waiting. It's part of the narrative as those prophecies are read at Carol Services which long for the coming of God's servant. We even put them in verse, sometimes singing: *Wait for the Lord, his day is near. Wait for the Lord, be strong, take heart.*

A fortnight ago, I sat alongside six other people in a waiting room anticipating my second cataract operation. We were total strangers thrown together waiting.

Some in the group huffed and puffed a bit, declaring it was the waiting they were not keen on. Well, I was last on the list that morning, I saw them all go in one-by-one, until in the end it was only me left. Of course, that was passive waiting. We could do nothing but wait – actually I did manage to write half a sermon, and I suspect I was the only one in the room who did that! But in terms of getting our eyes fixed, well, we didn't have the skills to bring about the needed conclusion of the morning, we just needed the patience to be ready for the eye surgeon.

When the ancient Israelites found themselves in Exile, in places like Babylon, there was a sense, or at least a hope, that this would be temporary, and what they were really doing was waiting. Waiting to go home. Yet, again and again they were urged by the prophets not to make this a passive time of waiting, but a productive one. They were urged, perhaps with counter-intuitive wisdom, to commit themselves to their new environments, to work hard and make a positive contribution to the wellbeing of their new surroundings. Sure, they longed to be home, they waited for the day of their freedom, yet in the waiting they could still find God and find purpose. These were not to be fallow years, and indeed some like Daniel and Joseph worked so hard, and made such a positive impression, that they rose to the top of society.

During Advent we are challenged to think how our present situation may be changed by our future hopes. Sometimes it's called the clash of two realms – how does the Kingdom of God impact upon the kingdoms of earth. This isn't passive waiting. It's about bringing our hopes and dreams into the present and grounding them in the here and now, whether that's for climate change, justice for the Developing World, or a longing for fresh starts in family relationships.

I've mentioned before what Canon David Goldie once said to me about his time at Christ the Cornerstone in Milton Keynes. It took a long time to build that central church, one that has the second biggest dome in the country after St Paul's. For much of his ministry there the church met in the city Library. These were the years of waiting. Waiting for the planning permission. Waiting for all the denominations to agree what an ecumenical cathedral might look like. They longed for that day when they could process from the library to their new home at the centre of the city.

But Canon Goldie said to me, these were some of the most exciting and blessed years he spent with this congregation. They were *Travelling Hopefully* together, and these years of waiting were years of blessing. They learnt so much together. He said he originally envisaged they'd only need four Church Meetings to discuss plans for the new church design, and then with a wry smile told me they ended up needing forty! But he said, this was fine – in the waiting, which was anything but passive, they learnt how to listen out for the whisper of God.

Advent can be thought of as a journey of waiting. And waiting is just part and parcel of so much in life, as frustrating as that might be to those activist tendencies most of us possess. Yet waiting doesn't have to be passive because time is a great teacher, and sometimes the more time we give a decision or a project, the more we learn about God, ourselves and others in the process.

The second aspect of the encounter between these cousins which I believe has been sacred in every Advent since is the blending of what we might call the divine and human.

The carols we'll be singing during the next month will attempt to explain the mystery of Gabriel's message and what the Church has subsequently labelled The Virgin Birth. We'd be forgiven, I think, for parking that part of the story in the *Things I don't understand* box. Yet, all of us appreciate the birth of a baby. To greet a newborn is to feel something close to the miraculous. Something so ordinary feels so special.

It is clear that the birth accounts for both John the Baptist and Jesus are written up in such a way as to emphasise a certain uniqueness, yet we cannot escape the fact that on their birth days thousands of others entered the world alongside them. Part of the wonder and mystery of Christmas is the irony that their births were both mysterious and ordinary at the same time.

Mary and Elizabeth are celebrated in Luke's gospel. Their response to God and willingness to be part of it is one reason, and perhaps another is that God comes close in the ordinary. The divine story becomes a human one in the births of John and Jesus.

The Church has traditionally ring-fenced certain callings, buildings and rituals as Holy. These are portrayed as more important than secular callings, buildings and rituals, and so a false dualism is created, one considered holier than the other.

Yet, such a division isn't found in the ministry of Jesus. His pulpit was as much in a boat as at a synagogue. His ministry was as much at home in a Bethany kitchen as it was in Jerusalem's temple.

So, when did we become so convinced about the sacred and secular divide? When was the heart and soul elevated to the holy, whilst everything else to do with the body demoted to the earthly? Because that's not the message of Advent or the story of Elizabeth and Mary.

We are told that before the arrival of Roman Christianity on these shores, the Celtic Christians blurred the lines between the so called sacred and secular. Their practice, a good practice, was to pray not just inside a church but whilst milking a cow. God was seen in everything and in every task. And such a perspective unifies life.

What happened to Mary, especially if she was so young as is often thought, must have been tough and full of anxiety. Perhaps nothing about the birth narrative has the rosy glow about it that we see on today's Christmas cards. All of it was challenging yet, we are told, Mary stored it all up and after it was over pondered these things in her heart. In doing so, I think, she saw the connection between the divine story and her human one. She saw the extra-ordinariness of God in her ordinariness. Such faith may sound ironic and

contradictory, yet holiness must find its place in the messiness of life: the changing of nappies, the struggle with adolescence, the disappointments in love, the struggle with old age.

There is, in reality, no sacred and secular divide because God is in all.

I think Elizabeth and Mary knew that.

Now, I've tried to write a classic sermon this morning with three points. So, he's the final one: today's gospel presents the cousins as gifts to each other, they were not alone.

Gabriel had barely left than Mary packs her bags and walks the 90 miles to the home of Elizabeth and Zachariah.

Some commentators wonder if she, in a sense, fled Nazareth because she had become the centre of gossip and inuendo. Who knows?

What we do know is that Luke presents their meeting up as a moment of supportive and empathetic mutuality. Here are two individuals who knew what the other was going through, two people who, when together, felt stronger than when alone.

Once again, it's an extremely, human part of the story. Later on, will come stars and angelic choirs, but now, nine months away from such heavenly drama is a very down to earth experience that at moments of challenge it's good to be together. It was surely worth a four-day walk, and another one home.

When we use words like compassion, comfort or companion it's obvious that they share something in common, their prefix...c.o.m. – meaning *with*. Companion – literally means to eat bread together, comfort is to draw alongside someone and offer them fortitude, compassion comes from the Latin, *com -patior*...to suffer with someone.

So, when we live in a world of compassion, comfort or companionship, we are living WITH others and finding strength from others. It's another example of the way the Divine and the Human story come together, God meets us so often in the smile and kindness of other people. And isn't that why Mary visits Elizabeth because for those three months they gained strength from each other. And as the Holy Spirit touched both their lives, they embraced each other and knew they were not alone.

Elizabeth and Mary:

Who knew and valued waiting.
Who encountered holiness in the ordinary.
And who gained strength from God's gift of each other.

May we delight in such blessings this Advent, in the name of Jesus who shares our walk and blesses our lives. Amen