



HOMILY by Father Robbie Low

4th Sunday of Advent-Year C-December 23rd-Bodmin

Readings: Micah 5:1-4, Psalm 79, Hebrews 10: 5-10, Luke 1: 39-44

Today's Gospel is the story of two women whose vocations are inextricably intertwined and two children whose destinies co-inhere at the very heart of human history.

Two women.

Their circumstances are the same.

Their circumstances could not be more different.

They are with child.

They are blood, of the same family.

Both have within them the fruit of divine miracle. Elizabeth because, like Abram's wife Sara, she is beyond child bearing age, the organs of increase have dried up and she was without hope of maternity or succession. Mary because she is that human impossibility, a virgin mother, a child of innocence herself where the Almighty has chosen to manifest in time. They both know their vocations by the message of an angel. For Elizabeth this is relayed by her husband from his angelic encounter at the Altar of Incense in the Temple. For Mary this is from a first-hand encounter with one of the great Archangelic messengers about the supreme work of God. Mary's puzzled husband, Joseph, like his namesake, will have this truth confirmed in dream.

Both women know that their, as yet unborn sons, will be the key to the destiny of God's people and to the whole human race.

Elizabeth is six months gone, that time when formation is long since achieved and the long steady process of growth and quickening are well under way. The heavy months are ahead and the unseen longed-for is making his presence felt pushing at the confines of his known world.

Mary has hurried here in her new state, knowing the miracle of Elizabeth from Gabriel's intelligence.

Elizabeth may face the strains of being a very elderly *prima gravida* but she will do so surrounded by the love and honour of her community. Her husband is a local vicar in the outskirts of the capital in the hill country of Judaea. They are much loved. This is a time of joy for the whole community and, knowing the miraculous circumstances surrounding this pregnancy, everyone waits with bated breath to see what this child will mean for Israel.

Mary is a scandal, an embarrassment. To the eyes of neighbours she has deceived the well-meaning good man Joseph with some elaborate demented fiction and would do well to be out of town. Only Joseph's 'misguided mercy' has saved her from the stoning that awaits the unfaithful. Few people know and believe the truth. For Mary this is a very lonely time. No-one in the community will welcome this event and, when driven south by the command of Caesar to the census, the Holy Family will not rush home to the one horse town where Joseph plies his trade. They will lodge in the Bethlehem area to be greeted by kings before the long flight south to exile in Egypt before Herod's murdering army. Where Elizabeth and her child will go we are not told but they will be under the same ban – born in the Messiah's town of David in the last two years and therefore a threat to the throne of the half-caste megalomaniac king.

We know only that years later John will emerge an ascetic from the desert community. Jesus will be brought up, when it is safe to return, under the northern skies of Nazareth in the Galilee of the Gentiles. The boys will not meet again until the encounter at the Jordan at the height of John's ministry and at the beginning of Jesus'.

We know too that both women's sons will be successively looked to as the saviours of Israel. Both these boys will be judicially murdered by the State. One mother will be long dead. The other will stand at the scaffold. The scene is set for one of the most beautiful mysteries of the Rosary, the Visitation. Mary, we are told, goes in haste, as quickly as she may, to get away from the scandal and the gossip, to this distant place of refuge. Here, away from the crowd and the thrum of everyday life, she will have the time, the quiet and the companionship she needs to come to terms with this tumultuous event that has, and will, overtake her life both now and, though she cannot know it, into all eternity. Here, in those precious early weeks, when the miracle child in her womb will take form, she seeks respite, kindness, calm, reassurance.

And how gloriously she receives it.

The older woman, her senior, who could have rejected her scandal and all, who could have pulled rank on this frightened and disorientated young girl cousin, does the opposite. Saint Luke, that great confidant of Our Lady, records that, the moment Elizabeth heard Mary's voice, the child in her womb leapt in greeting. (The unborn child - the first to acknowledge Jesus) Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit preparing her to give prophecy .

What she says here, in the presbytery garden on a warm sunlit afternoon in the hill country of Judaea, will echo down the centuries on the lips of the faithful to the last breath.

'Blessed art thou amongst women and blest is the fruit of thy womb.'

Not content with this accolade of Mary's priority, Elizabeth continues, 'Why am I honoured with a visit from the mother of my Lord?'

In this simple and singular moment, Elizabeth cedes seniority to Mary, just as her famous son will cede his place to his little known cousin thirty years hence on the banks of the Jordan River. More than that Elizabeth confirms for Mary the reality of what she has experienced. Religious experience is not easy. Often there is the lingering question, did that really happen? Am I going mad? Did I really see that? Hear that?

What Elizabeth tells Mary, in that simple and glorious affirmation, is that she is not mad or bad, demented or deceived. Elizabeth confirms the revelation. She puts Mary's mind at rest. Someone else is privy to the intentions of the Almighty. She is not alone any longer. Joseph knows. The family know. The world will make its own judgement, man by man 'til the end of time. Elizabeth adds: 'Blessed is she who believed that God's promise would be fulfilled.' (Teleosis) This is a reference both to the Messiah and the end of time.

Welcome, comfort, understanding, encouragement – what a great and abiding ministry this blessed and humble older woman has to the Mother of the Lord, to the Mother of the Church, to the disorientated and frightened young woman before her.

As we leave the presbytery garden of that long ago sunlit hillside, let's take with us that example and inspiration - welcome, comfort, understanding, encouragement for our young setting out on the way of holiness in difficult times. May our love for them so confirm them in the Faith that their lives may, with Mary, echo the great song of the Magnificat that echoed from the Judaeen hillside twenty centuries ago and nightly closes the evening prayer of the faithful:

'My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord.

My spirit rejoices in God my Saviour.

He has looked on the humiliation of his servant

But from henceforth all generations will call me blessed'

Welcomer, comforter, encourager, understanding mentor, companion of

Mary, Saint Elizabeth.....pray for us.