

Readings:

Micah 5: 2-5a

Hebrews 10: 5-10

Luke 1: 39-45 [46-55]

The Handmaid's Tale

This Sunday's Advent wreath candle is for Mary, and we heard about her in our Gospel reading – a passage perhaps not so familiar as the visit of Gabriel with his news that she would become the mother of Jesus – but an important part of the Christmas story nonetheless. Our reading was not just about Mary – Elizabeth is a key player too.

Two women, both of whom are unexpectedly pregnant, both by the will and action of God. Mary's pregnancy is definitely miraculous, but Elizabeth's is also willed by God, although we can presume that Zechariah is the father. Elizabeth's pregnancy must have been the cause of much rejoicing after such a long and painful wait. Had she been the butt of unkind remarks, like Hannah and Rachel many years before? Earlier in this chapter (Luke 1: 25) Elizabeth gave thanks to God that the disgrace she had endured had been taken away. Now she is vindicated and God himself has spoken. She must have felt greatly blessed – not only to be pregnant at last – but also because of God's part in it. Her baby is going to be very special – John the Baptist.

But what can we say about Mary? We are not told what happened when she told her parents about the visit of the archangel, and the news he brought her. Were they horrified that their virgin daughter, so carefully raised, betrothed to be married, had brought shame on the whole family? Did they even believe what she told them?

Tradition names Mary's parents Anne and Joachim. There is no mention of them in the bible, but the early church had many oral traditions which were handed down faithfully to succeeding generations of believers. The church honours them with a lesser festival on 26th July each year, but beyond their names there are no strong traditions about them, although we might assume they were godly people who had brought Mary up in the Jewish faith, and that she was someone who from an early age had had her heart and mind turned to God. They and she would have known the story of God with his people Israel as told in the scriptures. Perhaps they were able to believe the unbelievable.

Mary for her part has been told by the angel that Elizabeth is pregnant and she recognises that this is the action of God through Zechariah, and she hurries to see her relative. She set out with haste we are told; eagerly, another translation has it. If Elizabeth has good news, Mary has even better news. Mary knows about Elizabeth's pregnancy but Elizabeth doesn't yet know about Mary's. Mary comes to Elizabeth in a spirit of the respect due to the older woman, but when they meet we are told that the child in Elizabeth's womb leapt for joy, and filled with the Spirit she recognises Mary as the Mother of her Lord. So it is Elizabeth who defers to Mary. Her recognition of Mary as the Mother of the Lord is an anticipation of the place her son John will have as the herald of the coming of Jesus – as the 4th gospel tells us, John came to testify to the light but was not the light. As John himself said, 'He must increase, but I must decrease.' (John 3: 30). John's place was always second to Jesus, and this is reflected in the relationship between Elizabeth and Mary.

This whole scene of the meeting of the two women is led by the Holy Spirit. Zechariah had been told by the angel that the child John would be filled with the Holy Spirit even before his birth. His leaping for joy in the womb as told by Luke, and Elizabeth's recognition of Mary are indications of the presence of God through the Spirit as they rejoice in their good news.

These two women knew the story – the story that began two thousand or so years before with the promise to Abraham that he would be the father of many nations. The story continued with Moses and the prophets, all through the exile to the promises to Isaiah and others that there one day the promised one would come from God. He would restore Israel and bring peace and justice on earth. Mary and Elizabeth not only knew the story – they knew they were part of it and that their sons would be key players in this drama of salvation. They knew a that new act was about to unfold in the drama, and they rejoiced to be part of it.

They knew the promise of a Messiah who would come, sent by God, and they knew that just before he appeared there would be someone to announce his coming and help the people get ready. That is the role John the Baptist played as he preached in the wilderness and baptised the people to make them ready for the coming of God in Jesus. But that's to fast forward thirty or so years. Let's stay with Mary and Elizabeth.

That Mary knows the story and understands God's will for the world is shown by the words she speaks in the song we know as the Magnificat – my soul magnifies the Lord. This has been part of the church's worship since the earliest times and is familiar to all Church of England people who faithfully attend Evensong or Evening Prayer. In this song Mary rejoices over what God is doing through her, but also looks forward to the promised time when God's kingdom will be established, justice will be done and those who have abused their power will be brought to nothing. As in Jesus' teaching it is the humble poor who trust in God who will be blessed by God, not the rich and powerful who have lived their lives as if God did not exist.

How exciting for these two women to know what was happening and that they had been chosen for these roles. But the story goes on. It didn't end with the resurrection or even the ascension. The drama of salvation continues and will continue until the promised return of Jesus happens, and God's kingdom will be finally and fully established. So we are all part of God's story, we all have a part to play.

This great drama had a beginning – the Creation of all things by God – and it has an end. The end has been determined by God – he knows how it will end, but in the meantime we can co-operate with him in moving the story on. He is the producer, we are the scriptwriters. The details of the story are down to us human beings. The events of history such as the difficult times we are living in now, are very largely the action of people. That is what I mean by us being the scriptwriters. We can either co-operate with God and try to do things his way or we can go our own way as most of the world does. We can look to him for guidance but he has given us free will and we are free to act as we think best or as circumstances dictate. He has given us stage directions that tell us how to behave – the Ten Commandments, and Jesus' law of love, but he doesn't tell us what to do – he only asks, invites, calls us without ever forcing our hand.

Mary could have said no to God. But she knew the story and she knew that what she was being asked to do was a vital part of the unfolding drama. She felt blessed to be asked despite the awful risk she was taking in terms of her place in society, even that of her family. She knew too that the son she was carrying would never really be hers – he would always be God’s son first, and that she would have to stand aside as his mother and give him back to God. She knew blessing but also the potential for sadness that her role involved.

We can say no to God when he asks us to do something. We can go our own way, and live as if there were no God – that is what sin is – living as if God didn’t exist. That is how many people live and it’s the reason things are in such a mess now. People who try to write the script without following God’s way cannot write a complete drama because in their story there is no one in charge. They write lots of different stories all going in different directions but ultimately nowhere because they don’t know the beginning or the end. Only God knows the complete story from beginning to end. It’s a story with a glorious and blessed ending. Whose story are you part of?

To God be the glory. Amen.

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