

## **Luke 1: 39-55**

### **Sermon – Advent Gifts**

#### **Build up**

After a build-up that seems to have started in August, Christmas Day is now just three days away. It has been a long period of preparation as people have been buying presents for the family and friends and putting up Christmas decorations. In the church, Advent has been preparing us spiritually, bringing to us some of the key Advent themes.

Realistically, most people in our society won't have heard the church's messages of Advent but in a way today's Gospel account connects with at least two customs of the cultural, secular Christmas.

Advent and Christmas are when many will travel to see relatives, just as Mary did; and also a time when gifts lie unopened beneath a tree waiting to be revealed on Christmas Day - just as Jesus lay, within Mary ready to be born and revealed into the world on Christmas Day.

#### **Mary - Seeing God in ourselves**

The Gospel writer Luke is keen for his readers to show Mary as the one carrying Jesus, the presence of God on earth within her. As well as the angel Gabriel's message in the previous chapter, biblical scholars have pointed out how there is a link between how Luke portrays Mary here as carrying the Word of God in human form, and with the Ark of the Covenant back in the Old Testament that carried the word of God on stone tablets.

Gabriel had told Mary that she would be "overshadowed" by the Holy Spirit just as the Ark had been overshadowed in a cloud when in the tabernacle.

King David and the Israelites had brought up the Ark with “shouting and the sound of a horn” - here Elizabeth greeted Mary with a loud cry.

And, just as the Ark had been taken aside and kept from Bethlehem for three months, so did Mary come away from home and stay with Elizabeth for three months, eventually ending up in Bethlehem.

So Luke wants us to see that Mary was a kind of “Ark of the New Covenant.” That she was a carrier of God incarnate who will bring the Good News of salvation.

The church today, both as a place and as each person, can be seen as another New Ark of the Covenant. We are also carriers of God’s presence and this same message of salvation and hope. Mary is a reminder to us all that we each carry something within us that God has deliberately placed there. We each have our own unique gifts, character and experiences that are intended for us to use to grow the Kingdom. We may not feel like we are in the best position to use them but again look at Mary: a girl of perhaps twelve years old, unmarried and pregnant.

### **Elizabeth – Seeing God in each other**

Gabriel had also told Mary about her relative Elizabeth. So perhaps to escape the danger she was in - Mary could have been legally stoned to death - she visited her relative Elizabeth – the only other person who could surely understand the miraculous message she had just received.

Mary received here a double sign of the truth of what Gabriel had announced to her. The first was that Elizabeth was pregnant as Gabriel had said she would be. The second sign was given verbally to Mary by Elizabeth, who recognised that she was bearing a child and pronounced a blessing both on Mary and the child in her womb. Elizabeth then is the re-assurer and confirmer.

It is a wonderful thing when we see how God is working in someone else and equally wonderful when someone sees the same in us. Being part of a Christian community is about recognising one another's contribution and encouraging each other when we see this happening.

Elizabeth's example to us is that we may have to wait a long time before God's plan is fully revealed through us. It may be that much of our life is spent in disappointment or frustration but in Elizabeth we see the importance of patience and trust.

Mary is another example of God working through someone who was unprepared, certainly not in ideal circumstances. There is a tendency to think that we have to be in the perfect place before we are ready and able to serve, but Mary proves that God will call us at any time so as long as we are willing to hear it.

No-one would have considered Elizabeth and Mary likely agents of God's important work – and yet here we are today, recognising and celebrating their contributions.

### **Magnificat - Telling about it**

As Mary and Elizabeth met and understood how God was working in themselves and each other, they did the most natural thing: they celebrated with great joy. Elizabeth as we've heard was full of praise and blessing, and Mary, now liberated from her physical surroundings of judgment and danger, and any inward concerns of doubt and confusion, broke into a joyous song.

Praise, blessings and a hymn – this moment could be the very first Christian church service.

The Magnificat is a song which combines a collection of Old Testament texts with a pre-Gospel Gospel message. Before he has even been born, it speaks of the things that Jesus will come to do: to be the saviour, to show mercy and to feed the hungry to

name just three. The Magnificat was Mary's way of expressing her understanding of Gabriel's message and the reassurance that it was true that she really was carrying that which God had placed within her.

### **Moving on**

God has placed special gifts within us all and each of us is encouraged to acknowledge and use them in our own unique ways.

So how do we mirror Mary and express what God has given to us? What form does our Magnificat take? Song or service, or some other way?

Also, we should always be like Elizabeth and be mindful to notice in others which special gifts they are carrying, and encourage them to take them out the wrapping and use them to build up God's Kingdom.

Ultimately though, the story of Elizabeth and Mary invites us to take join them in their hope and their witness to God, and by acknowledging and celebrating the greatest gift any of us could ever receive, that of Jesus. Amen

***Rev'd Richard Haynes 4<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Advent 22 December 2024***