

Today is the fourth Sunday of Advent, the Sunday when we look at the influence of Mary in our watching for the coming of the Christ Child. The narrative from Luke's gospel is one of the most beautiful and poetic passages in the bible, but it is also one of the most unusual. The voice and story of women are often left out of the biblical narratives, but in this passage we listen to an intimate conversation between two women who have been made outcast by society, and yet honoured by God. The spotlight shines on Mary and Elizabeth, whom God has chosen to begin the transformation of the world.

But our insight into Mary and Elizabeth, doesn't start today in Luke's Gospel -rather in the reading we heard from Micah. Micah is one of the prophetic Hebrew texts which is used by the Gospel writers as a reference point - to help their readers understand who Jesus is. The section of the oracle we hear today vows that God's ancient covenant with Israel is secure and reliable, even if it may come about in an unexpected manner. For the Gospel writers, the oracle provides assurance that God's covenant with David - will be fulfilled with a new leader in the line of David. Yet this new ruler will rise not from Jerusalem, the royal city, but from Bethlehem, a small village. He will not exercise military might like the

Assyrians but will be one of peace who provides for his people as a shepherd. There are several allusions to Jesus in the image of this ruler, including his birthplace in Bethlehem, which was also the birthplace of David, and his pastoral image as shepherd, David's occupation¹. Given how well we know the story of the Nativity this might not sound alarming, or prophetic – but it was both - and builds on a consistent theme through the Bible that God delights in upsetting human expectations and challenging what we assume is just or noteworthy!

Part of our difficulty in unpacking Advent and Christmas is that it is so familiar, and we forget just how amazing and unsettling a story it is! Even Micah many centuries before is preparing the people for the way in which their expectations are going to be shattered. They, and we, will need to step out of our comfort zones to hear this story and to be changed by it.

And so it is, that Mary, having learned that she is pregnant by an angel rushes off to visit her cousin Elizabeth and share her news and her shame. Mary and Elizabeth were both woman who understood shame – Elizabeth for being barren; Mary for being pregnant outside of marriage. Interestingly in the

¹ http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=2701

Quran version of the nativity – Mary runs away into the hills because of her shame to hide, until Jesus tells her it is safe. Yet despite their shame and their experience of their communities, they are both willing to hear what the spirit of God is telling them – that the babies which they are carrying will transform the world – and whatever the darkness might feel like at this moment – the transformation – this hope is to be celebrated.

Hope is at the centre of the Advent and Christmas Journey. And I think Hope is something we need quite a lot of at present. Whenever I think of the need for Hope I am reminded of the most wonderful lines from the trilogy *The Hunger Games* (one of my favourite novels), when President Snow – the benevolent Dictator says *'Hope. It is the only thing stronger than fear. A little hope is effective. A lot of hope is dangerous².*

Hope is dangerous, it can lead us to believe that things might change. It can hold us when all else around us seems impossible. But hope is something that is very difficult to hold onto alone. It is why at times like we have lived through in the past 2 years it is important that we stay connected as best we can

² <http://m.imdb.com/title/tt1392170/quotes?qt=qt1666897>

with our neighbours and friends. Hope cannot be nurtured in isolation.

Mary and Elizabeth have a dangerous amount of Hope – so much hope in fact that it is faith!

Elizabeth's greeting to Mary is both a prophesy and a blessing. By declaring both Mary and the fruit of Mary's womb "blessed" she begins a series of blessings that weave through Luke's birth narrative and intensify its tone of joy, delight, and praise.

Mary, Zechariah, and Simeon will all add their blessings to the chain, praising God for what God is doing at this moment in history. Mary is blessed with divine joy -- because she has believed that God is able to do what God promises to do.³ She held hope in God in all circumstance.

In her blessing song, Elizabeth also expresses her own understanding from her own experience of being shamed and excluded. She had endured a lifetime of being treated as a failure. Her response to her miraculous experience emphasizes that God's grace has reversed her social status: "This is what the Lord has done for me when he looked favourably on me and took away the disgrace I have endured among my people" (Luke 1:25). At long last, in her

³ http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=2723

old age, she is made honourable in the sight of her community.

Elizabeth continues the pattern of social reversal by opening her arms and her home to a relative whom her neighbours would expect her to reject. Instead of shaming Mary, she honours her. When Elizabeth welcomes Mary, she practices the same kind of inclusive love that Jesus will show to others later. She sees beyond the shameful situation of Mary to the reality of God's love at work among those whom society rejects and excludes.

Elizabeth's words and actions invite us to reflect on our own openness to the ways that God chooses to act in our world. What is God doing and prompting in us, and in our community now. What situations that feel shameful are actually pointing us to God at work? Are we listening to what God is calling us to?

Or like Mary – when our situation seems hopeless – when we feel that we should despair – are we able to see the potential of what God is doing within us. For Mary it was to carry Jesus – God is at work in each of us if only we choose to see it. To what situations are we called to bring a dangerous level of hope?

There are many situations which confront us this Christmas tide the ongoing despair of the situation in Afghanistan, Yemen, Ethiopia, Haiti and more each day seem to emerge – where justice seems a long way

away for communities, individuals and nations. And then there is the ongoing Pandemic, which at times feels overwhelming; or even the poverty for many in our city who have little or no food this Christmas, those with inadequate heating or housing. And yet despite this in the next few days we will celebrate the birth of hope – the birth of dangerous hope – that continues to have the power to transform the world.

As Advent draws to a close, as we prepare to celebrate Christmas later in the week, we are invited to be like Mary and Elizabeth – to step beyond what we think is the story and look at what God is doing within us. To leave aside any fear or shame and turn instead to dangerously hope- to sing out to God in praise of what is possible. May this be our prayer as we come to celebrate later this week.

My soul magnifies the Lord,

and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour!

Amen.