

ST ALBAN'S EPPING. ADVENT 4, 23RD DECEMBER 2018. FEAST OF THE VISITATION

Micah 5:2-5a, Mary's Song of Praise (Luke 1:46-56), Hebrews 10:5-10, Luke 1:39-45

This Sunday, so close to the festival of the nativity of our Lord, is rich with both narrative and deep meaning. It is the fourth Sunday in Advent, the season when we prepare for Christmas, but when we also let our thoughts be directed to the second coming of Jesus, his return in triumph at the end of time.

Once upon a time, the Church focussed on a different theological topic on each of the four Sundays in the season, the four "last things", on death, judgment, heaven and hell, rather daunting in one's growing up years. Now there has been a move to take away any negativity and fear by replacing those subjects with hope, love, peace and joy. Very worthy, but is it also a bit of opting out? Is it a bit like the change in Three Blind Mice, suggested to overcome distress in sensitive children, where some people now, instead of "They all ran after the farmer's wife; she cut off their tails with the carving knife" sing "she cut them some cheese with the carving knife..."?

Then in more recent years, we have added the adoption of the Lutheran Advent Wreath, but it too has moved on since its introduction in the 19th century. No longer do we simply have four red candles, one to mark each Sunday of Advent, but we have, as Bp Ross mentioned last week, purple for the first Sunday in Advent, named the prophecy candle, purple for the second Sunday, the so-called Bethlehem candle, pink for the third Sunday, the shepherd candle and then purple again for the fourth Sunday, the angels candle. A central white one has been added as the Christ candle.

Advent has in many quarters become almost entirely an anticipation of Christmas and its tidings of comfort and joy... more cheese for the mice?... or just mindless partying? The world has been more successful at paganising our celebrations of Christmas than we have been in Christianising the pagan celebration of the solstice in mid-winter in Europe. We have to work hard at hearing what God has to say in our stories and songs, which is nothing like what the advertising using our words would have us think or feel or act on. Although, to say this on the last Sunday in Advent, is perhaps shutting the stable door after the proverbial horse has bolted!

Then we come to the lectionary readings for today...

Micah, 8th century BC prophet, speaks of the new ruler who will come from little Bethlehem. Another looking forward to the events of the first Christmas. He speaks almost tenderly of this insignificant town as he hints at the nature and person of Jesus, when he says "whose origin is from of old, from ancient days", a meaning surely that will only be grasped much later on. The belief that Jesus was with God since the foundation of the world is not even hinted at in Luke's gospel, but here it is, centuries before, in Micah.

Then we move to the epistle reading for today, from Hebrews. It is almost as if those who devised the lectionary want to be sure we understand that the sacrifice that Jesus would make, supersedes – really makes redundant – the old sacrificial system enshrined in the law of Israel. So Jesus said "See, I have come to do Your will." Jesus abolishes that system and

establishes his death as the perfect offering to God once and for all, that has sanctified us. This does not sound like Christmas upon us!

The gospel reading, in this year of Luke, is the story of the visit of Mary to her cousin Elizabeth. That event gives the name to another title for this Sunday, the Visitation.

You might have noted that in this unusually lengthy background/introduction, I seem to have overlooked the psalm. But look carefully; the song for the psalm today begins in Luke 1, where we have just left off from the story of the visitation in our gospel reading and is often referred to as the Song of Mary, or the Magnificat.

The gospel of Luke reads chronologically from Jesus' birth, through his growing up and into ministry, his death and resurrection. The birth story as told by Luke, reads as a simple narrative, but there is far more to it than that. Mark is the first written of the gospels and it is largely his material that Matthew and Luke use as their source. As Luke drew this together with the oral stories of his community and people's memories of Jesus, there was a problem of credibility with the standing of Jesus, who was obviously central to the gospel. The earliest preaching was about his death. He had died in shame and disgrace, and Paul spells out that the death of Jesus was a stumbling block to the Jews. It was considering and interpreting his death in the light of his resurrection, that made a difference to both religious and non-religious hearers of the Christian story. So, the gospel of Luke was essentially compiled in reverse order. There were the death and resurrection of Jesus which then raised questions about the life of this alleged God-man. What sort of life did he live? What had led to the death that he died? So his itinerant preaching and his ministry were considered next. And then there were the questions as to his origin. This means scholars believe that Luke's telling of the birth of Jesus and the surrounding events are a well-constructed, if straightforward-sounding narrative that reveals Luke's understanding of who Jesus was. It is, in fact, a theological introduction to Jesus. Scholars say that while the introductory chapters of Luke are not as majestic as the prologue of St John's gospel, they serve the same function at the outset of the book. There is a solemn introduction and then a series of little episodes associated with Jesus and John the Baptist, skilfully drawn together in the way they are written to serve to introduce Luke's Christology. It is important how we read this.

I nearly allowed my enquiring mind to ponder on who would have accompanied Mary on her journey, some 145 Kms. Surely a young, unmarried, newly pregnant woman in that culture, would not go alone I thought, or be allowed by her family to go alone, on this arduous, potentially dangerous journey. I do not find appealing, but almost sanitising, the way some sentimentalise it with a "happy families" version where Joseph takes Mary on a donkey, sees her settled in for the three months she stays and trudges back all the way to work in his carpenter's business. But I needed to curb my speculation because this sort of detail is not germane to this type of story, its purpose being theological rather than historical. What matters is that Mary sets her personal destiny in the context of the ultimate purposes of God and this accords with Luke's infancy narrative as a whole, where the future gospel is already contained in a nutshell and accepted in advance by the protagonists in the story.

The initial meeting could have been at least briefly tense, but as Tom Wright points out, the leaping of John in the womb at Mary's voice and the Holy Spirit carrying Elizabeth into shouted praise and Mary into song, indicate that underneath is a celebration of God, God who has taken the initiative and who is the ultimate reason to celebrate.

John the Baptist was an important Old Testament forerunner of Jesus in Luke's understanding. The early part of the gospel that we draw from today for two of our readings, covers all the events of Jesus' life, where John the Baptist played an important role. This part concludes with John's imprisonment and only then does Luke focus his total attention on the person of Jesus.

So how do we focus today; what do we take from the feast of the Visitation and the Fourth Sunday in Advent?

We need in fact, to go behind the story of Luke's gospel to the back story, to the Annunciation. When we hear the term "The Annunciation", we know it refers to the angel's announcement to Mary, but today we need to think of two annunciations by the angel Gabriel, that to Zechariah about his wife Elizabeth as well. Behind the visitation, there are the cameo stories of two women unexpectedly pregnant, Elizabeth long childless and well past child bearing age and Mary, much younger, betrothed to Joseph, but each of them knowing (severally but not jointly!) that he was not the father of the child she was expecting. By these stories, Luke wants his readers to understand the wonder of Jesus, born of the power of the Most High, the Son of God.

The word angel simply means a messenger and angels are rarely individually named in the stories of scripture. Gavriel in Hebrew means God is my Strength or Strong Man of God. Alongside the archangel Michael, he is described as the guardian of Israel and he is associated with imparting words of wisdom and divine encouragement.

Gabriel is mentioned only once before these two amazing messages that he brought, appearing to the prophet Daniel about six hundred years earlier, to explain his visions and saying "Thou are greatly beloved."

To Zechariah he said "Fear not! I am sent to speak to you and show you these glad tidings."

And to Mary, he said "Fear not!"

Then, as well as going behind the story, we need to consider what was in the minds of the compilers of the lectionary for today. We had the visitation story for the gospel, but one of our options, was to extend the gospel reading, going on to include the Magnificat; and that is in addition to having that song of Mary for the psalm, giving us the possibility of the Magnificat twice in our readings - an unusual and very heavy emphasis. One preacher speaking of the Magnificat says "It has been whispered in monasteries, chanted in cathedrals, recited in small, remote churches... set to music with trumpets and kettledrums by Bach..."

Let's have a look at what it gives us as a take-home message. The song that Mary burst into singing is jarringly juxtaposed against the scene of maternal joy shared by the women whose

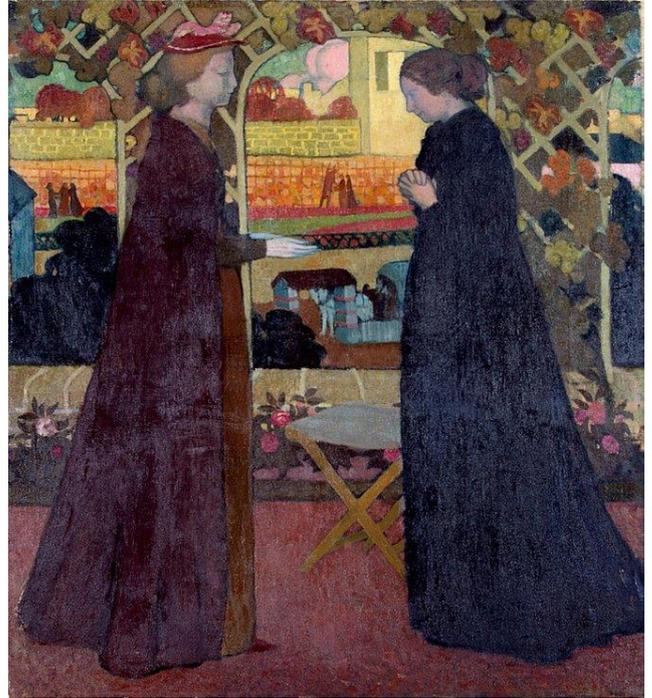
pregnancies were so unlikely. We can easily be diverted from paying attention to the scripture by focussing on tradition and some of the music and art of the centuries centred on the Visitation. Many artists, out of devotion, have depicted an idealised Mary, the sort of woman considered beautiful in their period and their culture; there was no attempt at realism or accuracy of portrayal. One preacher says that instead of being beautiful in a Western kind of way, with coiffed hair and peaches and cream complexion, eyes demurely downcast, Mary would probably have been short and olive skinned, with work-worn hands and cracked heels. Recently I saw the very beautiful 1894 painting of the French post-impressionist painter Maurice Denis, in the Hermitage exhibition currently on at the NSW Art Gallery. I tried in my mind's eye to superimpose on the painting by Denis, the swarthy little woman with her revolutionary song, but it was not easy. There she is, in an Italianate garden with flowers growing over a trellis and with a two horse carriage in the background, that I am sure she did not travel in. I am sure too that she did not arrive looking so serene and elegantly presented after her 145 Km trip, wearing a fashionable, dinky little 18th century hat! A lovely painting, but diverting for our current purpose! Mary's song moves rapidly from gentle amazement at the Lord being merciful, generous and gracious to her, that the woman in the painting could have sung, to the dramatic contrast of the Lord tearing down the powerful and trashing the schemes of the proud and wealthy that Denis' Mary would have been incapable of thinking! The activist part of Mary's song is the sort of revolutionary vision that sends shudders down the backs of those in power, who profit from the unjust way things are now. It is the sort of song that has got protest and folk singers locked up, for being a danger to the status quo. One commentator I read said that what the gospel writer and Advent are asking us to do, is to hold that disturbing, unsettling, wildly hopeful vision in constant tension with the seemingly innocuous vision of babies soon to be born and their happy mothers. He goes on with a powerful challenge, saying that the Gospel writer is warning us: "Do not kneel and worship this baby, unless you are ready to embrace the vision of the whole world remade in the image of God. Do not come and adore him, unless you are ready to have your life and your world and everything you hold dear, turned upside down and shaken and reshaped to fit a world where justice and truth and reckless hospitality reign. Do not come with your gifts to honour this newborn king unless you are ready to be caught up in the wind of God's Spirit and blown who knows where. This baby is the powerful presence of God whose kingdom will come and whose will shall be done on earth as in heaven. That is not good news for those in power, but it is very good news for all who suffer under the weight of the world and cry 'How long, O Lord? How long?'"

We prepare ourselves in the time remaining to rightly celebrate the first coming of Christ in two days' time, by reflecting on what it will mean when he comes in glory to turn the world on its head and put things right. Only in the light of that expectation can we really know what we are doing when we worship the God who comes to us as the baby of Bethlehem.

We close with a prayer by Janet Morley
inspired by the Magnificat:

O God, whose word is fruitless
when the mighty are not put down,
the humble remain humiliated,
the hungry are not filled,
and the rich are:
make good your word,
and begin with us.

Open our hearts and unblock our ears
to hear the voices of the poor
and share their struggle;
and send us away empty with longing
for your promise to come true
in Jesus Christ.
Amen.



Maurice Denis (1870 – 1943),
The Visitation,
The State Hermitage Museum,
St Petersburg.