

Luke 1.39-45; Micah 5.2-5a; Hebrews 10.5-10.
4th Sunday of Advent (3rd of month)
St. Andrew's Totteridge, 8:00 a.m. & 10:00 a.m.

Let the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts always be acceptable in your sight, O Lord my strength and my redeemer (Ps 19:14)

The reading for the 1st Sunday of Advent introduces us to the theme of waiting, 'The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will fulfil the promise made to the house of Israel and the house of Judah' (Jer. 33.14-16). It is fitting therefore, to return to this theme today albeit in a different form. There are dangers in being resigned to waiting, however, as we may miss the very thing that we've been waiting for (Paula Gooder).

I've lost count of the number of times I've done this and wonder if this has ever happened to you. Have you ever stood at a bus stop or on a platform, or been sitting on a bus or a train, and become so engrossed in your newspaper, your smartphone, a book or the people around you, that you've failed to get off at the right stop?

Christmas can be a bit like this, if those all-consuming preparations become too engrossing. Suddenly, the main event is upon us, and the moment comes when the great, grand mystery of God arriving on earth....is passed, and we've missed out on the point of it all.

Elizabeth has long stood as a symbol of waiting, long endured but joyfully completed. Luke's Gospel frames the story of Jesus' conception and birth within the story of his cousin John the Baptist's conception and birth (Luke 1 & 2). Elizabeth's conception is a miraculous one too, since she was well past the age of childbearing, and she conceals her pregnancy for about five months. It is then, in 'the sixth month' (1.26) of Elizabeth's pregnancy that the angel appears to Mary and, after the encounter, Mary immediately sets out to visit her cousin.

The greeting between the two pregnant women is famously celebrated by Elizabeth's awareness that her baby 'leaped in her womb' when Mary's voice was heard. Luke may have understood this to be the 'quickenings' of John, but in any case the biblical account is deeply joyful, and has become the source for important elements of Christian liturgy, such as the 'Hail Mary!' and the Magnificat (Janet Morley).

Both Mary and Elizabeth had been blessed by God, but both must have endured a maelstrom of differing feelings at the miracles they'd experienced. When the angel revealed the message to the Virgin, he gave her a sign to win her trust, the motherhood of an old and barren woman that would affirm God's power to bring about whatever he wants.

Notice how Elizabeth is the first to hear Mary's voice, but the as yet unborn John is the first to be aware of the grace this entails. Elizabeth hears and feels with her senses, but John leaps for joy at the perception of an unseen, unheard mystery. Elizabeth is aware of Mary's presence, but John is aware of

the Lord's – put another way, the forerunner is somehow made aware that the pledge of salvation is fulfilled.

The child leaps in the womb, the mother is filled with the Holy Spirit, but not before her son. Mary has already received the grace of God in ways we cannot fully comprehend, because she said 'Yes' – note how she had to be asked to bear God's Son. Her answer – 'let it be with me according to your word' (1.38) is in sharp contrast to John's father, Zechariah, who temporarily loses his voice because of his failure to have faith (1.20). Elizabeth acknowledges this by saying, 'Blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfilment...' (1.45a).

'You are also blessed because you have heard and believed. Believing souls both conceive and bring forth the Word of God and acknowledge his works' (St. Ambrose).

And so I pray – that the spirit of Mary will be in each of you as the Advent train reaches its station. Don't forget to get off, and don't forget to rejoice and to proclaim the greatness of the Lord. Christ has only one mother in the flesh, but we all bring forth Christ in faith every time we 'magnify the Lord' in some way. St. Ambrose again: 'The Lord is magnified, not because the human voice can add anything to God but because he is magnified within us.'

May each one of us this year experience this kind of Advent waiting; a waiting that ends not with a whimper of exhaustion, but in joyful recognition and praise of him for whom we wait.

Spoken in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Luke 1.39-55 **Mary Visits Elizabeth**

39 In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country,
⁴⁰ where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. ⁴¹ When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leapt in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit ⁴² and exclaimed with a loud cry, 'Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. ⁴³ And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me? ⁴⁴ For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leapt for joy. ⁴⁵ And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfilment of what was spoken to her by the Lord.'

⁴⁶ And Mary said, 'My soul magnifies the Lord,
⁴⁷ and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour,
⁴⁸ for he has looked with favour on the lowliness of his servant.

Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed;
⁴⁹ for the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name.
⁵⁰ His mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation.
⁵¹ He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.

⁵² He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly;
⁵³ he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty.
⁵⁴ He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy,
⁵⁵ according to the promise he made to our ancestors,
to Abraham and to his descendants for ever.'

Micah 5.2-5a **The Ruler from Bethlehem**

² But you, O Bethlehem of Ephrathah, who are one of the little clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to rule in Israel, whose origin is from of old, from ancient days.
³ Therefore he shall give them up until the time when she who is in labour has brought forth; then the rest of his kindred shall return to the people of Israel.
⁴ And he shall stand and feed his flock in the strength of the Lord, in the majesty of the name of the Lord his God. And they shall live secure, for now he shall be great to the ends of the earth;
⁵ and he shall be the one of peace.

Hebrews 10.5-10

⁵Consequently, when Christ came into the world, he said,

'Sacrifices and offerings you have not desired, but a body you have prepared for me;

⁶ in burnt-offerings and sin-offerings you have taken no pleasure.

⁷ Then I said, "See, God, I have come to do your will, O God"

(in the scroll of the book it is written of me).'

⁸When he said above, 'You have neither desired nor taken pleasure in sacrifices and offerings and burnt-offerings and sin-offerings' (these are offered according to the law), ⁹then he added, 'See, I have come to do your will.' He abolishes the first in order to establish the second. ¹⁰And it is by God's will that we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all.

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