

DATE: Wednesday December 15

CHURCH: St Matthew's Kensington

BIBLE PASSAGE: Luke 1:39-45

GENERAL THEME/TOPIC: Lectionary Gospel Readings

SUBJECT: Mary and Elizabeth

An apology and a question. This sermon needs to be preached by a woman who has borne and birthed children. This sermon needs to be preached by such a woman who also has theological and pastoral insights and experience. Therefore let me start with an apology that I am biologically unqualified to preach this sermon. But here we go.

The question ... how old was Mary who was to be the mother of Jesus when she received the news that she was to have a son and was to name him Jesus? Many believe that she would have been a teenager – maybe 16, 17 years of age. Many also believe that Mary was the member of a religious group in Judæa known as “The Quiet In The Land” – a group of pious, gentle people whose aim was to follow God and to practise the Commandments as best they could. It was to this quiet, young, pious woman that the news came that she was to give birth to a son and as to give him a particular name – Jesus.

Mary had an older relative – Elisabeth – who was in a pretty bad way really. She was pregnant for the first time, and was maybe in her 40's for this momentous event. How would a 40 year old, without all the help of modern hospitals, specialists, drugs, gynaecologists and post-natal assistance, bring a healthy baby into the world. And what was more, her husband was in a bad way too. He was an older man, but he had lost the power of speech ever since he had had some dramatic experience in the temple where he ministered as a priest. Maybe he was unemployed ... after all, what good was a priest who couldn't speak aloud, read the Torah aloud, preach a sermon aloud, give advice aloud?

Mary received some sort of indication that she should visit this older relative of hers. The message was, “Elisabeth, your relative, has conceived a son in her old age: and this is the sixth month with her that was called barren.” Our gospel reading this morning started with, “Mary set off in those days and went hurriedly to the hill country into a city in Judah, and greeted Elisabeth.” (1:39-40). Almost as soon as she received the news, Mary set off. There was Elisabeth, 6 months pregnant, probably feeling as unglamorous as anything, and her young relative said something like, “Hello Elisabeth. Peace be with you.” – a typical Middle Eastern greeting.

Why that should have caused the unborn baby in Elisabeth's womb to become very active just then, we'll never know. This is where we need that biologically-qualified preacher I mentioned earlier. Another question ... how pregnant was Mary when she greeted Elisabeth? Hardly pregnant at all. And yet ... and yet Elisabeth realised that Mary was pregnant, for she said, “And why should I be so fortunate, that the mother of my Lord should visit me?” How did Elisabeth know? Please, let's have that biologically qualified preacher!! It's a mystery to me and to most blokes, I reckon.

What do we make of all this? Out of such a basic, human story, can we see any lessons for us in the 21st century? I think we can. Two things:-

Firstly, as young as Mary was ... as soon as she realised that her relative, old Elisabeth needed companionship and a bit of comfort, young Mary was there. In her culture and community, Elisabeth would have been regarded as an oddity, being the age she was and being as pregnant for the first time as she was. Most first-time mothers would have been far closer to Mary's age than to Elisabeth's. But there was young Mary, maybe unfazed by the stares and glares of the other women in the Judean town ... there was young Mary, maybe with no words to say, but with a physical supportive presence to lend to Elisabeth

in her most unusual circumstances. Throughout the Bible we see examples of human comfort – maybe no words of deep significance and insight – but simply a pastoral presence, a companionable silence, a gentle and kind attention. That other thief on the cross at Calvary was this sort of presence for Jesus in Jesus' extremity. The disciples who simply walked along the road with Jesus and kept him company and about whom we know so little ... Thaddeus ... James the Younger ... the other Judas. They were just there – a pastoral presence for Jesus; companionably silent for Jesus; kindly attentive for Jesus.

Maybe you've had such a friend, such a relative, such a colleague, who came to be with you in your tough time. They didn't preach ... they didn't give advice ... they were just there, and that was enough for you. A pastoral, companionable presence. And perhaps you've been that, too, for someone else. You dreaded going to see them because you didn't know what to say. But it was your hug ... it was your just being there, that they needed and appreciated. It hardly seems spiritual at all. And yet it is deeply spiritual, because it is your spirit that is sympathising with their spirit. This is what Mary did for Elisabeth.

The second thing – was it a medical reason that caused Elisabeth's baby to heave dramatically when Mary spoke? I don't know. I'm not a doctor. But Elisabeth saw it as a sign – a sign that her unborn baby was recognising the majesty of the tiny foetus that was forming in Mary's womb. "The baby leaped in my womb for joy," said Elisabeth (1:44). This is controversial ground I'm walking on now. Do we get signs of things ... do we receive insights about circumstances ... do we receive hunches that turn out to be correct? Elisabeth's hunch about the life form in Mary's womb was absolutely spot on. I think we can, and do receive such insights and signs from time to time ... not often ... it's not as though we are psychics or something like that. There's no crystal ball or mumbo-jumbo involved. Such insights are for us to experience when they occur, to recognise for what they are, to mull over, and maybe to share with someone we trust and feel confident in.

As I said, it's a controversial area, but we must never allow our faith to be so cerebral ... so "brainy" ...that it is not ever experiential ... not "hearty." ; but then again we must. not allow our faith to be so experiential that it is unbalanced and unhelpful. Flashes of insights do come to us about all sorts of things, about all sorts of people. We must accept the insight for what it is, a flash of understanding that we have had, and that we treasure, but do not impose on anyone else. It's a private area of faith, not a public doctrine to be proclaimed.

Mary and Elizabeth – an example of pastoral presence and companionable care that we do well to follow; an example of flashing insight that we do well to appreciate.