

Advent 4 Luke 1:39-45 (46-55)

Are you familiar with the concept of a baby shower, this rather modern gathering of women, friends and family members, that seems to have come from the USA to herald the anticipated arrival of a new baby? I'm sure many people have although generationality I suspect the older a person is, the less likely they are to have taken part in such a gathering. The image, however, is quite helpful when reflecting on today's gospel reading.

The scene is the meeting of two expectant mothers, Elizabeth and Mary. The women were related although we have no idea how, they were both unexpectedly pregnant although were at opposing ends of the age range and they had both been made aware that their unborn sons were part of God's plan for the world, Elizabeth's son John was to be the one preparing the world and Mary's son Jesus would be it's redeemer. At a modern day baby shower, amongst other things, people talk about their motherhood experiences, so this would have been a baby shower with some pretty amazing stories!

This account of the two women and their experience of pregnancy exists only in St Luke's gospel, a gospel account written by a gentile for the newly emerging church amongst the gentiles which Luke was witnessing in his travels with St Paul. It is for that new audience that detailed accounts of the amazing stories surrounding the conception, birth and early years of Jesus and John the Baptist were perhaps more necessary as among the Jewish families in Galilee it may have been well known. It is unlikely that anyone would forget the story of the priest struck dumb for the entire pregnancy of his wife and spoke only after announcing in writing that his son would be named John, but that was what happened to Zechariah, Elizabeth's husband.

Perhaps it was the same for Mary, everyone knew of this young girl, who although she had everything in place for a marriage to Joseph went and got pregnant while they were betrothed, but even more surprisingly, Joseph stood by her, took her into his own home and they went on to bring up this boy who would become famous in Jerusalem and beyond for his mature theological debate, his fearless teaching against the practices of the elite and ultimately for his execution at the hands of the Romans but at the bidding of the chief priests, although his followers swear that they have seen him alive since.

If you lived in that area all of your life, you would imagine that families like these would stand out. But for Luke, the churches he was visiting across modern day Turkey and Greece, this was unknown, these families were unheard of and so he filled in the details. He tells us as his readers of the extraordinary family into which both these boys are born, a family where angelic visitation although not expected and naturally feared is ultimately heard and accepted. A family where trust in God's plan supersedes ambition to follow one's own plan. A family where John the Baptist and Jesus could be brought up to become the men they were sent by God to be, a voice crying in the wilderness, and the word of God incarnate.

It can be easy to succumb to the images of Mary as so meek that she is like a startled mouse, giving in to message of the angel through fear. That image does not do her justice at all. In reality Mary was an incredibly brave young woman in so many ways. She articulated before the angel her fears and concerns and in the end accepted freely and generously God's gift to her of bearing the Christ child. She did this in full knowledge that

it would bring shame upon her and her family, she did this with no guarantee that Joseph would stand by her and indeed with no guarantee that he would not have insisted upon the lawful punishment of stoning, Mary accepted the angel's words and showed herself to trust God completely.

By the time she visited Elizabeth the fear and trepidation had somewhat abated and she speaks through the magnificat, which we read today in place of a psalm, words of understanding of God's plan for the whole world as well as for herself. Yes, Mary is an example to us of obedience but also to trust and faith and that inner strength and determination that we can all carry when we walk with God no matter the hardship we face.

Mary gave to God the gift of her life, not in terms of ending it but of living it entirely for God's purpose. It is little wonder that she has become an inspiration to religious orders of women everywhere as they attempt with their own lives to do the same. There is a danger that Mary's great example can somehow seem to be so perfect that it is unattainable and so we fail to look closely at it or regard her too much for fear of disappointment. We have also suffered from a deliberate choice to distance ourselves from elevating Mary too highly for fear of Mary worship as some in other churches have been accused of.

But Mary cannot and must not be ignored. Her example to us of living life fully trusting in God is rarely seen elsewhere. She is present throughout Jesus' life, she is a constant. Her gift of motherhood does not end when he is weaned or becomes an adult or goes into public ministry or even at his death. Mary remains Jesus' loving mother his whole life and in that respect she is like most mothers we know, whether they are the ones who are regularly in contact with their children or those estranged from them, mothers are connected to their children. Of course fathers are too, and in this way Mary teaches about relationship, acceptance, support and the cost for her of trusting her son to follow his path set out by the father.

So, as we approach the end of the season of advent, the season of preparation, we join Mary in her expectancy. We take a peek at the baby shower of Mary and Elizabeth as these two extraordinary women compare notes about their extraordinary circumstances and imagine the things their extraordinary sons will achieve. When we come together to worship again it will be to follow Mary to a place of privacy, far from home as a displaced family, where that extraordinary son will be born and we will delight with angels and shepherds at the wonder of God made flesh in the form of a baby boy.

But for the moment we continue to wait, we wait with Mary in trust, in faith and in love. We allow ourselves to be inspired once again by her bravery and selfless giving. And as we prepare to celebrate Christmas this year we continue to look forward to that day when Christ will come again and when he will look to us and our lives lived in faith, trust and love as shown in our relationship both with God and with one another. May all we do and say this week bring us ever closer to that day, better prepared, confident and with joy.