

4th Sunday of Advent (C)
(Micah 5:1-4 / Luke 1:39-44)
19.12.2021

We are told that Mary hastened to visit her cousin Elizabeth. The text tells us: Mary set out and went as quickly as she could to a town in the hill country of Judah. She went into Zechariah's house and greeted Elizabeth. I remember once a Scripture scholar asking this very simple question: Why such haste on Mary's behalf as she made her way to see Elizabeth? To be honest, I cannot quite remember all the answers that arose in the class that evening, nor can I recall the final suggested answer the Scripture teacher himself proffered for the emphasis placed upon Mary's haste in the story. But, I do recall some of the proposals made by the group. I remember someone suggested that Mary may have felt the need to check out the veracity of what the angel told her about Elizabeth's situation as quickly as she could in order to feel reassured about her own situation, to verify if what had been said to her was true. I also recall it being said that Mary was probably desirous to share the news of her own pregnancy with her cousin Elizabeth without delay, considering that this woman who had also been graced by God, would be in a position, like no other person, to understand what she (the Virgin Girl of Nazareth) had just experienced. I also remember that someone drew much attention to the still unborn child's leaping for joy in the text. This person presented Mary's Visitation to Elizabeth as being rooted in Mary's need to share her joy... a joy that was so great it simply could not be contained. Mary was thought of having hastened because she just could not wait to make the Good News (the Gospel) known, as it were. As I recalled the teacher's question and some of the responses it awakened in the class, also came back to me something else that was said that evening that isn't actually stated in the text, but which I find myself recalling all the more because it was the reason my own late mother and my primary school teachers had suggested to me in my childhood for Mary's hastening to visit Elizabeth: Mary's readiness to be of help... and to be of help immediately, just as soon as her assistance was required and it was possible for her to offer it. With the benefit of hindsight I am inclined to think now that this explanation was an idea my late mother and my teachers would have picked up from preaching they had heard or simply from prayers they had prayed. If the Visitation story was presented to me in this way I expect what those who shared with me this slant on things wanted to inculcate in me was that Mary's example should serve as an encouragement to be charitably caring in regard to those I might see to be in any kind of need along life's way. The bottom line of the explanation for Mary's haste I received as a child was that needy people should be helped without delay. Just as Mary hastened to visit her cousin Elizabeth in order to bring this ageing relative assistance, so I should seek to draw alongside those who need my help as promptly as possible. A willingness to commit oneself to the generous service of others is, of course, the reason given for Mary's Visitation to her cousin Elizabeth in the famous Novena Prayer addressed to Mary of Perpetual Help. The Mother of Perpetual Help Novena Prayer, promulgated especially by the Redemptorists, presents the Visitation scene in this light when it has us pray: When you learned that your cousin Elizabeth was in need you immediately went to serve her and offer your help. It goes on to have us plead: Help us, like you, to be concerned for others. That should be understood as immediately concerned for others and prompt to serve them.

Whatever the timing and the reason or reasons in regard to the meeting between Elizabeth and Mary/Mary and Elizabeth, the encounter between these two women was an extraordinary event... an extraordinary event which concerned not just themselves, but the children they bore in their wombs. The Visitation Gospel scene is not just about the meeting between Mary and Elizabeth. It concerns – we could even say it is centred upon – the encounter between John the Baptist and Jesus/Jesus and John the Baptist. The real wonder of the meeting between the two

women in the story is the marvel of the encounter that took place between the fruit of their respective wombs.

It is surely significant that the text draws our attention much to the wombs of these two women – and to the children they carried within them. What matters above all else when it comes to both Elizabeth and Mary/Mary and Elizabeth is the life they were both given to bear within them: the life of John the Baptist and the life of Christ, whose coming John had for mission to prepare.

The joy Mary and Elizabeth evidently shared stemmed from the God-given gift of life they both carried within them. It was a joy which they were led to share with each other. As it was between Mary and Elizabeth/Elizabeth and Mary in their meeting, so it should be when it comes to our meetings with others and theirs with us. Joy should be at the heart of all our encounters with others.

What really matters above everything else is the life we carry within us and the life which others carry within them. We are called to see in this life the traces of God's gift of Himself which we all carry within us: the gift of His own life which is always at work within our lives. I wonder if we well and truly recognise this to be the case. We might ask ourselves: Are any of us sufficiently aware of the treasure we carry deep within our self – the treasure we bear in the earthenware jars we are? Are any of us sufficiently aware of the treasure that others whom we meet carry deep within them? We should be! Each and everyone of us should be able to say when it comes to our meetings with brothers and sisters in the faith what Aelred of Rievaulx declared when it came to the significant encounters of his life with his brethren in monastic life and others with whom he shared spiritual friendship: Here we are the two of us and I hope that Christ make the third with us. For his part, the Apostle Paul cries out over and over again: Christ is in our midst. Are we aware of this? Are we sufficiently conscious of Christ's presence within us and between us?

In the encounter between Elizabeth and Mary the joy of the Holy Spirit abounded. Elizabeth cried out to Mary: The moment your greeting reached my ear the child in my womb leapt for joy.

The importance of the womb of both women (the womb of Elizabeth and that of Mary) is drawn to our attention in this morning's short Gospel text. We find the word womb employed three times in the few short verses read. Clearly, the idea of a mother's womb as a privileged sacred space – a shrine of divine activity – abounds in the whole of this Gospel passage. That the womb is a place of divine activity is true when it comes both to Elizabeth and to Mary, but not only in regard to these two women. The same is true when it comes to every mother's womb. Every womb that bears God's gift of human life is a place of divine activity. This thought runs throughout the Bible.

In this morning's Gospel passage we see how the first meeting between John the Precursor and Jesus/between Jesus and the one sent before Him took place in their mothers' wombs. We could say that the wombs of Mary and Elizabeth constituted the locus of the cousins' initial encounter. All in all, I hear a call addressed to us today to be conscious of the importance of the womb as a sacred space; a call to be conscious not just of the physical reality of the womb, but of the seat of life which is to be found in each one of us. Saying that, I am thinking not only of the women among us, but all of us. I hear the emphasis placed upon the womb in today's Gospel passage as an invitation addressed to all of us – men as well as women – to dare to see ourselves and to see others as beings who are (certainly who are called to be) what I like to think of as pregnant with divine life! If the psalmist can speak at one point of a wicked man being pregnant with malice, can we not think of just men and women being pregnant with goodness?

It is surely important that we dare to linger a little longer at the threshold of the meeting place between John and Jesus/Jesus and John: their respective mother's wombs. Let me suggest that we take time to remember that, just like these two infants, we were all once been carried in the womb of our own mother. What we experienced therein was nothing less than the divine activity which shaped and formed our lives. Along with the psalmist, we might think of God knitting us together in our own mother's womb. (Think of what we read in psalm 139.) The Lord who was so very present to everything concerning us during the months of our gestation remains so today!

We are all of us the blessed fruit of our mother's womb. Every person we encounter is the blessed fruit of his or her mother's womb. Saying that, I am brought to think of another beautiful little line from the Book of Psalms which I found myself turning to just the other evening as I prayed at the bedside of a dying woman, as her family kept vigil there to be with her at her passing, surrounding her with their loving care and attention. The psalmist declares: A blessing the fruit of the womb. We find many other psalm verses in the same vein as this one. Today's Gospel passage plunges us into a very real sense of the great truth contained in those words. It helps us see (at least, it should do!) that we are all of us a blessing... and, as such, we are all of us called to be the same for others: a blessing. The psalm verse – a blessing the fruit of the womb – should also help us see that every person we encounter along life's way should be regarded as a blessing which the Lord has set upon our path. St Benedict encourages us to hold this notion in our hearts throughout his Rule for Monks. It was brought to our attention as a community in this morning's Chapter in that section of the Rule which we read on The Order of Community Rank (RB 63). It is a vision Benedict promotes especially when it comes to those whom the Lord sends to the door of the monastery.

If this Sunday would have us think of the beauty of our having been carried in our mothers' wombs, it would have us go further than that. It would have us think of the wonder of our being carried and held in what we might think of as God's womb. If the Lord who engendered us found a safe lodging for each one of us for nine months in our mother's womb, we could say that He has carried us in His own womb throughout our time of gestation and that He has continued to carry us and care for us throughout our lifetime. St Oscar Romero captures this idea beautifully in his writings. Let me quote from his work *The Violence of Love*. Romero shares with us a very beautiful thought therein when he declares: God is the exquisite likeness of a mother with child. God bore me in His womb and loved me and destined me and already thought of my days and my death. In the precarious situation in which the then Archbishop of El Salvador found himself, he went on to muse in his own regard: What will happen to me doesn't matter to me; God knows it. To his people he then had this to say: Let us not be afraid, brothers and sisters. We are living through difficult and uncertain days. He explained to the suffering people he addressed that there was so much they simply did not know – and this left them very vulnerable, but there was one thing they did know. I quote: We are known and loved by God. (...) He loves us, He keeps on loving. (...) We do not lose hope in this great truth.

If only this last Sunday of Advent helped us realise what a blessing is ours to be intimately loved by God! We are all of us well and truly blessed! If only this last Sunday of Advent helped us realise what a blessing each one of us already is and what an even greater blessing we are all of us called to become! If only this last Sunday of Advent helped us see what a blessing each person encountered is, what a blessing all others are in our lives! What a blessing the whole of life is meant to be!

... Then it would have helped prepare us for the celebration of the Saviour's birth and our own rebirth in Him.