

Trust (Luke 1: 39-45)*Advent 4*

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The story we've just heard tells of the episode our tradition calls 'The Visitation' – the visit of the newly expectant Mary to her more heavily pregnant cousin Elizabeth in the Judean hill country. It's one of the most beautiful and poignant scenes in the gospels. Neither woman, of course, could have anticipated the situation in which she found herself: Mary is a virgin – in the Greek, she says 'I do not know a man' – while Elizabeth is barren and past child-bearing age. At one level, this is a familiar biblical trope. And as with all the other impossible conceptions in Scripture – Sarah's of Isaac, Rebekah's of Jacob and Esau, Rachel's of Joseph, and Hannah's of Samuel – we hearers are to understand we're once again in the realm of divine action. Symbolically at least, these are children of promise and only God could have brought them to be, the God of whom it's said that 'nothing will be impossible'.

Yet for all the familiarity of this general type scene, the episode unfolded in today's reading seems unprecedented. Angels have announced, husbands Zechariah and Joseph are dealing with it, but before Elizabeth and Mary proceed to give birth to their sons and slip modestly from the narrative, the two women meet. And it's a meeting so full of energy and life, so prophetically charged, that what positively leaps from the text is their active involvement in what God is bringing about through them. You can feel it in the verbs, in the pace of the story and their decisive agency.

Listen again: 'In those days Mary set out' – she's the one who initiates her journey and she goes 'with haste to a Judean town in the hill country, where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth' – and I love that juxtaposition – it's his house, he's it's head in this patriarchal culture, but Mary directs her attention immediately, not to him, but to Elizabeth. And the sense of urgency and

energy builds. 'When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit and exclaimed with a loud cry' – remember that loud crying is always a sign that the Spirit is speaking through you, the sign of a prophetic word – 'Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb'. Without having heard anything of Mary's story, without warning of her arrival, Elizabeth sees what's in front of her and recognises what's going on. She's a seer, on the inside of what God is up to. Humbled and wondering, she asks: 'And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me?'

And then the next bit seems especially significant. Elizabeth goes on: 'For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leaped for joy'. The child's joy, the Baptist's prophetic knowing is mediated through Elizabeth's hearing, or so it seems. Finally Elizabeth takes upon herself the prerogative to bless her young kinswoman: 'And blessed is she who believed there would be a fulfilment of what was spoken to her by the Lord'. And immediately Mary responds with her own prophetic cry: 'My soul magnifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour' and so spills forth the Magnificat. It's an extraordinary and powerful encounter – one in which they share delighted mutual recognition of what they're participating in. Something is being fulfilled through them, something new coming to be through them, and this 'something', they wonderingly understand, concerns the 'salvation' of the whole world – the bodily advent of God's justice and mercy, God's peace and love. Little wonder they're riven by joy.

Well, like Elizabeth and Mary, we too are awaiting a birth. Over these past few weeks, we've been exploring what preparing for God's coming among us involves. Our readings have shown it means being open to the real, to truth – waking up and undergoing a kind of reckoning or judgement, because when the light of Christ dawns, we will see who and how we really are. We've seen that preparing to receive the one who comes means acknowledging also our need and despair, knowing deep in our bones we're unable to transform ourselves or our situations by sheer force of

will. And it means repenting – that is, giving up our grasping, defended ways of being, our selfishness and self-sufficiency, being open to receive the gift.

In Elizabeth and Mary we see all this lived out – honesty, humility, generosity and undefendedness. Yet in them, we're shown one further necessary dimension of preparing the way of the Lord, and that is daring, courage, trust – the willingness to exercise agency and accept responsibility in the face of no certainty, no guarantee. For these women, God's coming into the human world means being part of its realisation. If they had not participated, God could not have come in the way we believe God did come in that time and place. Poet Nicola Slee imagines the magnitude of Mary's consent in these words:

My will my own
My word to give or withhold
God knelt long at Israel's door, awaiting my birth

In the season of Advent we celebrate that it's God's nature to come; we remember God's yearning is always to be with us, to heal, liberate, create life out of death and nothingness and that this yearning is not itself dependent on our response. Yet at the same time, if this divine grace, this healing and liberation and life is to be enfolded in our life and manifest among us, the astonishing testimony of the gospel is that some of us need to participate in its realisation. Some of us must dare to believe it, to respond accordingly.

And yet, you might think, it's all very well for Mary and Elizabeth. There were angels zooming in from all over, visions in the Temple, prophecies being fulfilled – all the recognisable signs of divine activity. It was obvious something was afoot, as was their designated role in it all. But what does this mean for us? Beyond the rhetoric, what actually are we supposed to be doing? How might participating in the Advent of God-with-us look in our lives in the next few days?

Well, as I think about this for myself, here's what I notice. I notice I struggle at times really to believe what I just talked about – really to trust there's an energy in and towards our world that actively seeks to bring healing and comfort, that wills our good. In the face of pointless suffering, the blind destruction of natural disasters, social dysfunction and greed, the story of God with us seems sometimes a fairy tale – a scrap of tinsel patently failing to cover the terror beneath. And yet, I wonder if it's just here that the witness of Elizabeth and Mary makes a difference. Because once you get past the spiritual pyrotechnics, the appearance of signs and wonders, what these women reveal most deeply is that we only really grow to trust the promise of God's coming and experience the truth of it as we entrust ourselves to it, as we dare imagine we're called to be involved.

For them, this practise of daring trust meant taking seriously the intimations of their call, being open to conceive and bear new life for the world. For us – well, perhaps it's not so different. For us too, I think, accepting responsibility for God's coming into the world has to do with holding open the space of possibility – not denying the pain and anguish of life, but neither shutting down in cynicism, bitterness, regret. For us too, it's about being faithful to the situations we find ourselves – to circumstances both chosen and unchosen, cultivating our capacity to pay attention and respond to what might yet be. Thomas Merton spoke of 'living as listeners'. And, as with Mary and Elizabeth, our participating in God's coming involves the willingness to give ourselves bodily to enfleshing love – perhaps holding someone close, sharing our space, perhaps holding our tongues or releasing our grip.

It takes a kind of reckless abandon to give ourselves to this work of love, this active faith in God's coming in the midst of the world's injustice, chaos and distraction – the same reckless abandon that saw Mary catapulted onto the road in her haste to reach Elizabeth, and that filled Elizabeth's prophetic cry. Just as they did, we have to choose whether we will give ourselves, whether we'll dare to participate in love's realisation on earth despite everything. It's not easy, especially when we're

hurting ourselves, tired or lonely or sad. And yet, after all, why not? 'Tell me', wrote another Mary, the poet Mary Oliver, 'what do you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?' Or, as the Lord, the God of Israel, had put it to his people centuries before, 'this day I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Choose life'. (Deut. 30: 19).