

THE VISITATION

LUKE 1:39-56

Women in the Bible Series

OPENING PRAYER

God the Holy Spirit, open the doors and the windows of my minds and hearts, that we may listen for God's Word in these words of Scripture, and be refreshed and transformed by the fresh air that you blow through us. In the name of the Blessed Trinity: Creator, Redeemer and Giver of Life. Amen

EXEGESIS AND REFLECTION

This episode in the life of Jesus, usually called the Visitation, brings together two women who have conceived miraculously. Their apparently joyful greeting has again stamped itself upon the imagination of Christian art – if you call up images online you will see them sometimes coy and embarrassed, but sometimes with a head thrown back in a delighted laugh of amazement. And, in Dinah Roe Kendall's modern portrayal, Elizabeth and Mary greet each other, glad but weary, reminding us how tiring and physically – as well as psychologically – demanding it is to be pregnant. Whatever the impact of representations of this story, we are clearly presented with two important women, who, albeit briefly, stand centre stage in this, for Christianity, most important story. And as they do so they enable life, make possible the gift of God's life in all its fullness, as John's gospel would say.

For the writer of Luke's gospel, there are many inter-textual resonances which lift this from a straightforward narrative to one of exceptional significance. The writer's literary strategies also emphasise this. John the Baptist 'leaps' in Elizabeth's womb when she sees the pregnant Mary, echoing the leaping in the womb of Rebekah of both Esau and Jacob, highly important figures in Judeo-Christian salvation history. More than that, however, Elizabeth stands in the tradition of the prophets – of whom her son will be one – as she interprets this intra-uterine experience. She recognises this movement as indicating that Mary is not just her young cousin, but is the 'mother of my Lord', a phrase which the great Ecumenical Council of Ephesus in 431 CE endorsed (Theotokos, meaning 'bearer of God' or 'Mother of God'), as a way of highlighting that Mary had conceived and given birth not just to another prophet, however great, but to the second person of the Trinity. Elizabeth is able to read the signs with the mind of prophesy, the gift of God's Spirit. She also acts as a kind of midwife, not in the literal sense, since she is not named in the nativity narratives of the Gospels, but as one who helps bring to birth.

What Elizabeth assists in bringing to birth here to is Mary's Song, the Magnificat, often regarded as the first proclamation of the gospel message in the Gospels, and perhaps to be read alongside Luke 4: 18-19, as a sort of manifesto for the rest of Luke's Gospel,

and analogously of God's Word. What we have here is a narrative which is at least in part about the solidarity of women, and perhaps a paradigm of solidarity between all human beings, and even the whole of creation. I would suggest that in our acknowledgement of one another, our celebration of what each represents, we can give authority and confidence for the other to find a voice, and tell forth the Way of God.

The Magnificat is itself another inter-textual example, and echoes the words of Hannah in I Samuel 2:1-11, where another greatly blessed, and possibly miraculous, conception is greeted with the praise of God who has lifted up the lowly. It is also framed within the story of Samuel, again God's chosen one and prophet, and one whom some scholars argue emphasised to the people that God alone was their sovereign.

In Mary's Song there is a reversal. The reign of God, she asserts, turns upside down the values of the world. Under God's reign the poor are to be lifted up, regarded as of highest value. The rich will be sent away, as of no account. This is the Good News of Jesus Christ. I am reminded of Blessed Oscar Romero's words – Romero, Archbishop of El Salvador was assassinated in 1980 – in answer to the question, 'What must the rich do to be saved?' to which he replied, 'they must be converted to the poor,' because it is with the poor, the marginalised, the rejected, that we will find God, and our lives will be transformed.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- Have a look online at some of the representations of the Visitation. What do they 'say' to you about this narrative from Luke's Gospel. How do you respond to their message
- Do you have experience of being 'heard into speech' as Mary was, or of 'hearing another into speech'? What was that experience like? Can you see any parallels with the prophetic tradition?
- What message do you think the Magnificat might bring to life in your particular context?

CLOSING PRAYER

Creator God, as your servant Elizabeth heard her cousin into speech so that the gospel might be proclaimed, may we listen for your Word in others and empower them, so that together we may embody your steadfast love, and this world be transformed into your kingdom. Amen

SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING

- Tissa Balasuriya, *Mary and Human Liberation* (London, Mowbray, 1997)
- Sarah Jane Boss, *Mary* (London, Continuum, 2004)