

Last Sunday, we journeyed with Mary, "*The Willing Servant of God*". Mary's journey to the manger, started with a face-to-face encounter with God's messenger Gabriel, who invited her to take God at His word. And this is **faith**: not a fuzzy warm feeling of trusting someone, but to exercise a radical submission to the wonder of what God has in store for us, **and** accept our place in that wonder. **Faith** is a journey of learning to live with, enjoy and relish the **mystery** of God.

Last Sunday, we left Mary at this very stage of grappling with the mystery of God, perplexed and puzzled, yet frightened by the possible outcomes. It was her faith, wasn't it, in the person of God, which gave her the courage to obediently submit to His plan. In her mind at least, perhaps not immediately in her heart, her faith in God allowed her to accept His plan. The journey of faith starts with a conscious and deliberate decision of the mind, and the heart accepts the outcome, and relishes in the journey.

The Angel Gabriel tried to relieve Mary's anxiety by declaring a truth about God, *nothing is impossible with God*<sup>1</sup>, pointing to her cousin Elisabeth, who was unable to conceive a child, was now in the sixth month of pregnancy, expecting their first child, a son!

Last Sunday, I lamented the word **child-less** as being very cruel and heartless. Several years ago we met a doctor specialising in working with couples afflicted with infertility who said, the word **child-less** is a harsh and bitter stigma, a shame, placed on women by society.

The word **barren** comes from the Hebrew, to describe famine conditions when, a lack of water in the soil, prevents seed from taking root. It does not brand the person; it describes a condition. **Barrenness** is cured with

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<sup>1</sup> Luke 1:37 (AMPC)

"showers of blessings" (*pun intended!*) as we see in the life of Elisabeth and Zechariah.

So, *In those days [immediately following Gabriel's visit], Mary arose [decided] and went **with haste**, into the hill country, to a town in Judah...*

In other words, having heard the Angel Gabriel's message, Mary wasted no time, to get ready and leave for cousin Elisabeth's home.

Was she doubting God's word spoken through Gabriel? - **NO!**

Did she want confirmation, in order to believe God's miracle? - **NO!**

Did Mary want the sympathetic company of someone who herself has experienced the miracle of God, who might empathise with her own experience? - Most likely, **YES!**

Mary arrives at cousin Elisabeth's house. Homes then, and around the world today, in warmer climates, the front door remains open during the day. People known to the family announce themselves as they enter.

Luke describes this social custom. *Mary entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elisabeth at the door. When Elisabeth heard Mary's greeting [before seeing her], ... the baby in her womb "leapt"!* The word for "leap" describes a sudden jolt, an almighty kick, which unsteadied Elisabeth.

As an aside, to make this point clearer, last month marked the 50th anniversary of the 1967 Abortion Act. Of 190,000 abortions conducted in England and Wales in 2015, 98% of all legal abortions were done for social reasons; less than 3% of abortions were performed because of handicap or serious injury to the mother.

With all the discussion today about when conscious life begins in the womb, here is an amazing testimony to the reality of conscious life in a

six-month-old *foetus* in his mother's womb, responding to an external stimuli!

Back to our narrative! What follows might best be described as two "*operatic solos*": Elisabeth sang "with a loud voice", i.e. she sang at the top of her lungs, *fortissimo*, in full voice.

In most Bibles, her song is printed in prose; in reality her song is a poetic, improvised song. Elisabeth is overwhelmed, but she chooses to place herself in the background, joyfully acknowledging the greater honour given to Mary. Elisabeth acknowledges God's gift of a son, "*God has seen my barrenness and has taken it away*", but when she meets Mary, to whom a much greater gift has been given, she makes a choice to humble herself, singing loudly, with delight and joy, to honour Mary.

More than 2,000 years after Elisabeth's choice of humbly submitting to her young cousin, she continues to be exalted, held up as an example wherever this story is narrated all over the world.

Last Sunday we asked ourselves, *Aren't we guilty of **not** respecting God's choice of person in a role*, of not giving our neighbour the respect and reverence with which God treats them? ... that very often, we see our neighbour's failings, and question God's choice? Gabriel knew, whom God has chosen, He must respect; and now we see Elisabeth show respect to the One whom God has chosen for a greater role.

Israel has been waiting for thousands of years for the One woman chosen by God, whose Son would deal the fatal blow to satan for deceiving the human race. Standing before Elisabeth, was this Special, Chosen Woman! Exciting times!

As prophecy comes alive, and Elisabeth is overwhelmed by the occasion, the text tells us very clearly, the Holy Spirit stepped in and gave her the words of worship!

The next *operatic solo* is Mary's song, a beautiful song of praise, in four stanzas (we know it as the *Magnificat*), in which she summarises God's work of grace in her life, and expresses her own experience of joy and of worship, because of her personal relationship with God.

In the first stanza (46-48a), Mary sings of her selfless surrender to her Saviour God. With her entire being, she magnifies, worships, exalts and adores the Lord God, whose plan of salvation is being worked out through her.

In the second stanza (48b-50), Mary sings of God's work of grace in her life. This God of might and holiness intervenes in her life, she an insignificant Galilean teenager; every generation thereafter will call her blessed, not an expression of pride, but she recognises the privilege bestowed on her, speaks with humility and awe.

The third stanza (51-53) is the *crescendo* of Mary's song. Looking back in history to the present, she sings of the coming revolution, which has begun in God's choice of her and Elizabeth, two insignificant daughters of Israel.

In the first three verses Mary sings prophetically, God is about to accomplish a complete reversal of human values, which have been distorted over thousands of years. It won't be the spiritually proud, the socially mighty, nor the materially prosperous who will have the last word. Mary sings of a God who is not bound by how men and women think, or what they do, but who is looking for those who are obedient to His call.

In closing, the fourth stanza (54-55) is a ***diminuendo***, a gentle, thoughtful benediction. Mary recognises the historical significance of what is about to happen. God's faithfulness to His chosen people Israel, is the outcome of the fact that God keeps His promise of salvation.

Mary then stays on for a further three months through to the full term of Elisabeth's pregnancy. What a beautiful picture of the two women spending three months in the quietness of a Judean village. Mary, the teenage mother-to-be, and Elizabeth, the senior citizen mother-to-be, sharing their journeys with God, the older woman sharing with her younger cousin, the wisdom of her years. Luke implies that Mary remained until Elizabeth gave birth to John. That would have been the social custom, that a younger member of the family, helps a older member of the family, through a difficult time.

Mary is now three months pregnant and returns to Nazareth, the most likely time when she told Joseph about the events in her life. We shall pick this up next Sunday.

There are four lessons about worship we can learn from Mary's song.

First, Mary's worship grew out of her submission to God and obedience to his word: *I am the hand-maid of the Lord. Let it be to me according to your word.* We will struggle in worship if we are not surrendered to what God has revealed to us.

Second, Mary's act of worship was a spontaneous expression of joy, a wonderful release of honest emotion, which was controlled by, and grounded in, God's written revelation. There are at least ten references from the Old Testament in her song. This is a very necessary part of our worship experience, to use the whole, the complete Word of God.

Third, Mary's own experience of worship was shaped by her clear sense of her own identity. She knew her place in God's plan as "God's hand-maiden," a part of God's sweeping plan of redemption for mankind. She knows she is a small part of God's big picture of what he is doing in the world, and her life in it.

Finally and perhaps most importantly, Mary did not sing in order to experience worship. Her song was an overflow of a life of worship, a communion of intimacy with God.

We often think, if we sing the right songs, if our body language is right, if we are led by the "right" leadership style, then we can worship. But we miss the point. Worship flows naturally from a life that is rightly related to God. Worship is both a language of, and an expression of, God's love.

Luke, the doctor-scientist who is also an artistically sensitive Greek, is the only gospel author to set down in writing, five songs: Gabriel's, Elisabeth's, Mary's, Zechariah's **and** the Heavenly choir on the night of Jesus' birth. These five songs are in marked contrast to the contemporary Jewish religious songs of lament of that day, the mournful songs of a people in spiritual exile, sung in variations of the minor key.

These five songs are songs of joy, sung in a totally different key, full of majors, major 7<sup>ths</sup>, 9<sup>ths</sup> 13<sup>ths</sup> and all the happy joyous chords in our music. In preparation of Jesus' coming into the world, music was reborn!

How will we worship this Christmas? What will shape our worship? Will we be spontaneous, and joyful and happy in our worship? Will we sing songs and carols to experience worship, or will our singing be a joyous overflow of worship from our hearts?

The answer to these questions can be found in the question, ***at the manger, whom have we come to worship, and why?***

Christmas is a potent reminder, that God has not abandoned us, that His Son Jesus came as the promised offspring of the woman who will deal a fatal blow to satan and restore us to His eternal Kingdom? This is our worship!

**AMEN.**