



Revd Ro's Reflection on The Fourth Sunday of Advent Year C

Hebrews 10.5-10

Luke 1.39-55

Last week I spoke of a time when I saw pure joy on the face of another person and I told the story of the women in the Mother's Union in an African village receiving the gift of a cow from fellow members in England. I spoke of the radiance of their expressions which came from pure joy. Joy because this gift, 'Mary Rejoice' as they called her, would mean a new life for them; she would literally turn their lives around.

Now, I wonder, can you think of a time when you felt pure joy. It is worth spending a few moments thinking about it. One that stands out for me was when I was told I could go forward for ordination and another was when suddenly, one Christmas morning, I was given the gift of a wooden nativity that had been carved at Bethlehem. It wasn't just the figures, wonderful though they are; it was the love that inspired the gift. I will never forget the joy of that Christmas morning and every time I look at them I think of that happiness.

When you are given a gift in love it inspires joy. At Christmas we celebrate the greatest gift of God to humanity, the incarnation of Jesus Christ, Emmanuel, 'God with us.'

Today, when we light the fourth of our Advent candles we think of Mary the mother of Jesus. It is pure joy that infuses the whole of our gospel passage for today. Last week our reading celebrated the life and work of John the Baptist. In this first chapter from Luke we have the visit of the Angel Gabriel to Zechariah.

⁵ 'In the days of King Herod of Judea, there was a priest named Zechariah, who belonged to the priestly order of Abijah. His wife was a descendant of Aaron, and her name was Elizabeth. ⁶ Both of them were righteous before God, living blamelessly according to all the commandments and

regulations of the Lord. ⁷But they had no children, because Elizabeth was barren, and both were getting on in years.'

It is made quite clear that he was a priest, they were good people but 'getting on in years'. Elizabeth had no children, and her chance was well past as far as they were concerned. Poor Elizabeth, in that society it was a shame to be childless but to her it was also her deep sorrow. Now suddenly the Lord is at work because the Angel Gabriel appears by the altar with a message for John's father.

¹³ 'But the angel said to him, 'Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you will name him John. ¹⁴ You will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth, ¹⁵for he will be great in the sight of the Lord.'

The angel is quite specific: John will bring many to the Lord and most importantly his commission is, 'to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.' John then, is to be the one who appears by the Jordan demanding repentance, demanding that people turn to God once more and proclaiming the coming of God's Messiah.

Gabriel visits the young girl Mary and announces the great news,

'Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favour with God. ³¹And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. ³²He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. ³³ He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.'

We have heard this read at carol services so many times over the years but if we look carefully the news the angel brings is stunning. It is frightening too. Mary is engaged to Joseph, she is not married to him, to conceive a child under these circumstances is therefore terrifying; it could have cost her her life. Unlike Zechariah when he hears the news of John, she believes absolutely, and her reply to Gabriel echoes down the ages and changes the course of human history.

'The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God. ³⁶And now, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son; and this is the sixth month for her who was said to be barren. ³⁷For nothing will be impossible with God.' ³⁸Then Mary said, 'Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.'

It is six months after Elizabeth conceived John that Mary is visited by Gabriel and she goes at once to visit her. Is this simply because the women are close or is it deeper than this, is Mary drawn to her relation because both children are from God and destined to achieve wonderful things in his name?

The meeting is a wonderful celebration of God and it is irradiated with pure joy. The first thing that happens at their meeting is that we are told 'the child leapt in her womb.' Even the unborn child senses the presence of Mary, the mother of the saviour. Elizabeth's words really set the scene for the rest of the passage.

'And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit ⁴²and exclaimed with a loud cry, 'Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. ⁴³And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me? ⁴⁴For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb

leapt for joy. ⁴⁵And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfilment of what was spoken to her by the Lord.'

There is no doubt in Elizabeth's mind that Mary is carrying the saviour of the world, the long awaited Messiah, the one who would rule Israel and set them free.

This takes us to another famous passage from Isaiah 9 foretelling the coming of the Messiah:

⁶ 'For a child has been born for us,
a son given to us;
authority rests upon his shoulders;
and he is named
Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God,
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.
⁷His authority shall grow continually,
and there shall be endless peace
for the throne of David and his kingdom.
He will establish and uphold it
with justice and with righteousness
from this time onwards and for evermore.
The zeal of the Lord of hosts will do this.'

This was the dream of Israel's people; prophesied throughout their history, one day there would come a leader, a man of God who would save them. One day the Messiah would walk the earth. He would bring God's reign on earth. To do this, evil would have to be destroyed. Mary and Elizabeth were of an oppressed people, they knew all about corruption, bullying and brutality. They knew the rich had much and the poor had nothing. Knowing this background helps us to understand Mary's song, known to us as the Magnificat, it is actually based on the Song of Hannah, 1 Samuel 2.

Mary and Elizabeth would have known all the biblical passages which prophesied freedom and the day of God's victory over evil. Jesus comes to set the prisoners free. These words from Isaiah 61 are what Jesus reads on the Sabbath day in the synagogue in Nazareth, He is really saying, 'I am he,'

'The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me
to bring good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives
and recovery of sight to the blind,
to let the oppressed go free,
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour.'

How similar are these words to Mary's song. Mary's song shows pure joy but it is also a song of revolution. It is a hymn of praise to God, a thanksgiving for God's favour to her, the 'handmaid of the Lord' but it is full of words like those quoted above which show the old order of oppression turned on its head and goodness restored. It tells of the time when evil, bullying and oppression will be vanquished. A time when the greedy rich upper classes will be overthrown and the poor will have all

they need, when 'justice will roll down like the waters and righteousness like an overflowing stream.' (Amos 5). This is the will of God.

⁵⁰ His mercy is for those who fear him
from generation to generation.

⁵¹ He has shown strength with his arm;
he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.

⁵² He has brought down the powerful from their thrones,
and lifted up the lowly;

⁵³ he has filled the hungry with good things,
and sent the rich away empty.

⁵⁴ He has helped his servant Israel,
in remembrance of his mercy,

⁵⁵ according to the promise he made to our ancestors,
to Abraham and to his descendants for ever.'

God will undo all evil oppression. It is God who rights the wrong and her song celebrates this as fact. All the promises made to his people from Abraham down will be fulfilled in this child, the child she carries in her womb, and John will be the 'prophet of the most high, he will go before him to prepare his way.'

What love of God these women show, what utter faith, and jubilation. What certainty that the just ways of God will come to fruition. They will have their trials but they do not think of that, their concern is not for themselves but their focus is entirely on the children they carry for the Lord their God.

Comberford church was dedicated to St. Mary and St. George and I remember doing a sermon on the life of Mary. What a tough time she had. A refugee not long after the birth of her child, the terror of his loss around his twelfth birthday, losing him at thirty to this dangerous life of an itinerant preacher and standing at the foot of the cross watching him die an agonising death. Yet Jesus, even as he dies on the cross, looks at her in love and consigns her to the care of John, the beloved disciple.

Not for nothing had old Simeon, who recognised the child for what he was, foretold 'a sword will pierce your own soul too.' Indeed it had, over and over but Mary never loses faith in her Son. Mary is to experience the joy of the resurrection of her Son; Mary will receive the Holy Spirit poured out on those first believers at Pentecost. She has her joy in plenty.

It is a good thing to read this passage at times when maybe we feel down and experience once again the total joy of these two women. To know that they have handed themselves with total faith into God's love, he will protect them, he will care for them. There is a lesson for all of us. This is the God who holds us all in the palm of his hand.

The reading from Hebrews talks of revolution too. The old ways have passed and the new way of Christ is here. Yes, even while the writer of Hebrews is penning this Temple sacrifices are continuing, the priests are going in and out and annually the High Priest will go into The Holy of Holies to make

sacrifices for the forgiveness of his sins and those of the people. But that is just the point; he is interceding over and over again. Not so with Jesus.

We have seen Jesus overturn the tables of the money changers; drive them out from his Father's house. It is a real act but it has deep symbolism too. With the coming of Jesus, Temple worship is totally unnecessary. Jesus, as he enters the Temple, is the presence of God. The Temple is simply a shell and much of what happens there is corrupt.

The writer of Hebrews makes this point just prior to our reading,

^{10.1} 'Since the law has only a shadow of the good things to come and not the true form of these realities, it can never, by the same sacrifices that are continually offered year after year, make perfect those who approach. ² Otherwise, would they not have ceased being offered, since the worshippers, cleansed once for all, would no longer have any consciousness of sin?'

Obviously the sin of the worshippers is not eradicated once and for all by the old ways of the Temple. If they were, why do these ceremonies have to be repeated year on year? The writer quotes from Psalm 40. ⁶'Sacrifice and offering you do not desire, but you have given me an open ear. Burnt offering and sin offering you have not required.' The sacrifice of bulls doesn't take away sin forever! As he explains the passage quoted in the text the writer is quite clear on this,

⁸ 'When he said above, 'You have neither desired nor taken pleasure in sacrifices and offerings and burnt-offerings and sin-offerings' (these are offered according to the law), ⁹then he added, 'See, I have come to do your will.' He abolishes the first in order to establish the second. ¹⁰And it is by God's will that we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all.'

The first order, Judaism was established by God, the law was given by God and God's people lived by it, God intended that it should be so. That which was right and proper throughout history has been superseded by the new way of God, the way of Jesus Christ. This is God given, ordained before time by God.

Jesus came into the world to save sinners. He died on Calvary in love. It is the blood of Jesus that washes away our sin, he brings salvation. Jesus dies at Passover, indeed St. John has him dying as the Passover lambs are being slaughtered. Jesus is the Lamb of God that takes away the sins of the world. The act was final. It was once for all.

Jesus takes on him the sin of humanity, he takes our place, he dies for us and 'is obedient, even to death on a cross.' By taking our sins on his shoulders he sets us free. Jesus fought a terrible battle there on the cross but he was victorious over evil and hate, they were defeated by love. This is the God who loves us so much that he was prepared to die for us, that is staggering. This is what we commemorate at Holy Communion week by week.

Jesus returned to his father, he is not in a holy of holies made by man but he is really in the presence of God and in that he takes humanity to the heart of God. Jesus is fully human and divine; in him our sin is wiped away. Jesus, at his coming, brings in the New Creation of God. He begins the process of God's perfected order. The writer of Hebrews is at pains to reiterate that. There is no way that those early Christian readers must slide back into Judaism, that old way can never achieve what Jesus does for them.

We thank God for his great love shown to us at Calvary. Jesus at his resurrection won for us eternal life with him. Jesus at his incarnation walked with humanity. Jesus is the face of God that humanity has seen. We have the presence of the Holy Spirit with us always. We, like Mary, should shout for joy as we rejoice in this and thank God for his love which is now and forever.

I wish you all a peaceful and blessed Christmas.

'All hail,' said he, 'thou lowly maiden Mary, most highly favoured lady!' Gloria. Sabine Baring-Gould.

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