

2018-12-23 ... 10.am Advent 1V ... The Venerable Paul Thomas

(To Licence Revd Judy for Fauls and Tilstock churches)

There is something almost comical, and close to unbelievable, about the story we heard as this morning's Gospel. The thrust of this narrative, which will find its fullest expression in the song which Mary sings, traditionally known as the Magnificat, is that God is set to overturn the present world order. That God intends to unseat those with power and give dignity to those in poverty. A new way of living is about to be launched which will be subversive and undermining of the way the world's life has been structured up until now. In short, a revolution, social, economic and spiritual is about to take place.

O.K. so if we are to believe this then we will be curious to know who God has got lined up to introduce this revolution. Knowing how radical and far-reaching it will be we could rightly imagine that God has some pretty impressive allies to do his work for him. Archangels perhaps? An Emperor? Or maybe the top brass in the religious sphere like the High Priest or the Pharisaic party? But no, none of these feature in the story we have heard this morning.

Instead we read about the meeting of two pregnant women. One a young maid who is not married and the other a much older woman who has suffered barrenness for years. Both women were in fact to be scorned – the one for becoming pregnant out of wedlock and showing herself to be a loose woman. The other for years of failing to bear a child – which in Jewish eyes was a sign of being out of favour with God.

And yet... it is these two individuals – these two women – these two disapproved of women – who take centre stage in God's plot to change the world. Surely not, we are bound to say. Two women will be totally preoccupied in childbearing – how on earth could they be the main players in the launch of God's revolution and redemption? Well before we try to answer that one thing is quite clear: the two women, Elizabeth and Mary, are not at all concerned about how the revolution will go forward. Nor for that matter, are they in any doubt that they are somehow involved in its progress. The outstanding feature of their meeting is joy. They do not approach each other tentatively or with uncertainty but with confidence and jubilation. They do not have crestfallen looks or furrowed brows marked by anxiety and fear but they have smiling faces and voices full of blessing and song. When Elizabeth hears Mary's greeting her baby – whom we know as John the Baptist, - leaps for joy in her womb. The verb in Greek is *eskirtasen* and it is the same verb, which in Hebrew, describes David dancing and skipping in 1 Chronicles 15. He was doing so to celebrate the Ark of God in their midst – the Ark being associated with the very presence of God with his people. The Ark contained the tablets of the law from Mount Sinai – symbolic of God's covenant relationship with the people of Israel. So Luke is saying to us through the use of this verb about skipping – look, here is someone responding – even in the womb – to Mary who like the Ark bears within her the guarantor of God's presence – in the tiny foetus whom we know as Jesus.

The same verb about skipping or leaping occurs also in Malachi 3 v 20 where it says: 'the sun of righteousness will rise with healing in his wings – and you shall go forth leaping (that's the verb!) like calves from the stall'. So again the leaping of John the Baptist in the womb echoes the response of those who recognise that the decisive moment of God's salvation is coming about – and so, says Luke, by including that particular verb – right there and then in the coming of Jesus, there was coming about God's decisive moment of salvation.

So what Mary and Elizabeth know as they greet and embrace one another is that the fruit of their bodies – John the Baptist and Jesus the Christ – will be right at the centre of God's revolution – right at the core of the forthcoming moment of salvation for the world.

So through their pregnancies both women are making a vital contribution to God's ongoing plan for the world. That is what they have learnt and that is what they are celebrating together as they meet **PTO**

up and exchange their news. They may be physically weak: they may be nobodies in society and indeed in religion – but without them God’s plan would fail to go forward and the fact that two very ordinary women living very ordinary lives could be regarded in such a way by God has got to give you and I encouragement. It means that ordinary people like us, living ordinary lives, can also play their part in God’s plan of salvation.

I have just been reading Rowan Williams’ latest book ‘Christ the Heart of Creation’ which I can assure you is not for the faint-hearted and is no easy read. But the essential theme he explores in the book focuses on the question: Who is Jesus? and in trying to answer it, Williams turns to Saint Augustine a great thinker of the 4th Century and notes that Augustine talks about ‘the total Christ’. And when he uses that phrase Augustine means three things. 1st he means that we have to take account of the human figure whom we read about in the Gospels. 2nd he means the presence of the divine word – bound up intimately with the human Jesus. But then Augustine goes on to talk about a 3rd meaning of the ‘total Christ’ and here he is thinking about the Church. In the Church – in the likes of you and me – we see refracted through myriads of difference individuals something of the other – regarding love of Jesus. The wonder of Jesus Christ is somehow ‘spelt out’ in all the lives that his followers live. So at the end of history when we want to say ‘Who is Jesus?’ – It will inevitably include what we know of Jesus through those who have followed Jesus. No matter how weak or inadequate we might have been – nevertheless a glimpse, a glimmer of Jesus – will have shone through our lives.

And that is what connects us with the story of Elizabeth and Mary meeting in today’s Gospel. Yes, it might seem comical that they should be the linchpins of God’s salvation at that point in history but they were. And the lesson for you and me is that we are the linchpins for God’s salvation in this place and at this time. Yes you and me.

Again doesn’t that seem a bit comical? That we who make up the church in a particular place and who do not seem to qualify as the ‘movers and shakers’ of our community, who do not come out as those with power and influence and learning; who do not impress by the quality of our religious commitment or character – that nevertheless we are the ones God has put here to be agents and instruments of his saving purpose for the world. We are the ones to carry the baton of revolutionary love in the world, and to sing Mary’s song of subversion and change about a better way.

That song (what we call the Magnificat) functions in Luke’s narrative like an aria in an opera. It stops the action of the Gospel in order to celebrate the greatness, goodness and graciousness of God. It’s a good reminder of what we are called to do as we follow Jesus. But one of the dodges that many Christians have tried is to transfer the responsibility for Christian living to the clergy. There is the person in ‘holy orders’; the one who ‘went into the church’. If you want an exemplar of Christian living – look at him or her, don’t look at us. They’ve got the theology and the learning – they can teach and they can inspire. And of course the Church has regularly fallen into that trap. It has divided Christians into first and second classes with the ordained in the first class and the laity in the second class. That makes clergy feel special; it gives them power and status. But at the same time when the limelight is on the clergy – everybody else ends up in the shadows, hidden behind the glare of the ordained Christian. To go back to the idea of the ‘total Christ’ – we are allowing an eclipse to take place that blanks out the life and witness of the people who could and would be reflecting the beauty of Jesus Christ.

So, yes we must value and affirm our Christian leaders but not to the extent that we distort Church life – robbing both them and everybody else of their true calling. Listen to these words of Canon Robin Lamburn, a missionary for over 60 years until his death in 1993:

‘We young men of the 1920’s thought that God had given us Westerners great blessings and we were duty-bound to share those blessings with less fortunate people in the African Continent. But our attitude was mistaken.

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If you go to give you must also be prepared to receive; if you seek to teach you must also be ready to learn.

Once a very very poor African lady came to me for help because her clothes were worn out, and she had no money. I agreed to help. But then she said: 'When my little field of rice is harvested will you promise to receive a gift?' I agreed. I had learnt that I was not there to teach but to share.'

As I come to licence Judy Hunt this morning I hope you will remember that story. Judy does come with special gifts and an ability to teach but that must never mean the eclipse of your gifts or your wisdom. Judy has come to share. Then as you go forward together, recognising that you are like Mary and Elizabeth, just ordinary people living ordinary lives but at the same time lynchpins in God's plan of salvation for Whitchurch, Tilstock and Fauls you will give expression to the 'total Christ'

And you will know when that is happening because like Mary and Elizabeth your lives together and your sharing of good news will be marked first and foremost by Joy.

Amen.

Ven P Thomas – 23rd Dec 2018