

**2021-12-19 ... 10am Service Sermon ... Mrs Jane Rylands****Luke 1**

I have really enjoyed having the first chapter of Luke in my head over the last few days to prepare for this morning and I have been completely charmed, even enchanted, anew by Mary. But there are two women in today's extract and I want to begin by thinking about Elisabeth.

Elisabeth is married to Zachariah, a priest, and she is also of a priestly line. I think it's quite interesting that Luke tells us that. They are an older couple and Luke tells us that they live and by implication have lived blamelessly before God but that they are childless because Elisabeth has been unable to conceive, something which she finds shameful. I think it probably made their ministry difficult as people saw their shame.

Zachariah is joined in the Holy of Holies of the Temple by Gabriel which, unsurprisingly, scared him out of his wits. Cue the **'Do not be afraid'** from Gabriel who says **'Your prayers have been answered'**. I wonder if Zachariah and Elisabeth were still praying for a child in spite of knowing the time for a pregnancy had expired? Gabriel tells Zachariah that they will have a son who they are to call John (which, just in case you were wondering means **God is Gracious**). Zachariah doesn't believe Gabriel who strikes him dumb.

As we know, John is born, grows up to be John the Baptist and meets an horrific end at an age similar to the age that Jesus was when he was killed. I wonder what Elisabeth had to say to God about that!

And so to Mary ... still a maid. Luke doesn't mention Joseph at this stage, we have to read Matthew for his story. I wonder whether Mary and he have even met yet, maybe that wouldn't happen until their wedding day. What do we know of Mary? Those of us who are regular at evensong know her song well, we sing **the Magnificat** practically every week.

It is a song of vindication, of joy at been recognised by God. She refers to herself as a lowly servant, some translations say slave girl. She talks about the hungry being filled with good things. I hear a teenager, raised to honour God, with whom she has often had words – she has wanted to know why the rich seem to get everything their own way, why no-one seems to notice her, perhaps even why her life is so constrained because she is female and why she can't make any decisions for herself ...

Mary receives the visit from Gabriel. Like Zachariah, she also questions how what is said can be. She's told that the Holy Spirit will come upon her and Gabriel points her to Elisabeth and the story of her pregnancy as a kind of proof that God can do this. And she replies something along the lines of 'OK, Bring it on!'

Luke doesn't claim to know when the moment of conception happened, was it while Gabriel was with her or did she get a bit of time to take the idea in? We only know, and this is where this morning's verses began, that 'in those days' Mary went to see Elisabeth.

I have been pondering why. There was a film a few years ago which graphically brought to our attention that an unmarried mother would likely be stoned for her sins. But Mary was with Elisabeth during the first three months of her pregnancy, a period when her pregnancy could easily be hidden. I think perhaps she went, partly picking up on the prompt from Gabriel, but knowing that Elisabeth, daughter and wife of priests, was a scripturally wise, kind and God-fearing woman and that she was someone she could go to, to share her thoughts and discern the way ahead. As Gabriel doesn't **PTO**

seem to have really mentioned Joseph, perhaps she even wondered whether he was part of her future. Gabriel did talk about 'David's line' though, and it is Joseph who is the descendant of David.

Jesus did something similar after his baptism, spending the 40 days in the wilderness. Perhaps many of us would benefit from this idea of taking a retreat at big decision times. But notice that the 'yes' response to the Holy Spirit is almost instant. The retreat comes afterwards.

Bible translator and commentator Nicholas King says that: ***The two volume work Luke – Acts is the story of what happens when people allow themselves to be 'filled with the Holy Spirit'.***

Elisabeth greets Mary with many blessings. One of them was **'blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfilment of what was spoken to her by the Lord.'** Unlike Zachariah, Mary dared to believe that she was seen by God and had a part to play in the developing story of God's plan for Israel, and, as it turned out, for all humankind. The story continues to this day, do we also dare to believe that God sees us and has a part for us too?

I want to conclude with a note on the timings of the next bit of the story. Mary leaves Elisabeth before, and seemingly just before, John is born. We might have thought that Mary would have liked to have helped Elisabeth with the birth and been a spare pair of hands for the new mother. But it seems that the stories of John and Jesus, apart from that initial leap of recognition from the womb, should be separate until they meet in the River Jordan for Jesus' baptism.

Mary too must have thought it time to face her family and Joseph and the in-laws, strengthened in her resolve to be obedient to God, her pregnancy beginning to show, perhaps morning sickness having finished. The time for retreat ends, life in all its fullness must be regrasped and lived.

Zachariah did not believe what he was told by Gabriel but it happened anyway, it was God's plan. Elisabeth was not filled with the Holy Spirit and the understanding the wisdom of the Spirit brings, until that leap of recognition by the baby inside her. Mary's belief on the other hand meant she walked blessed, comforted - as in given strength, and purposeful because she was filled with the Holy Spirit. That same fullness is there for us and all who dare to believe.

Amen.