

## A Homily for Advent IV

*Micah 5.2-5a*

*Hebrews 10.5-10*

*Luke 1.39-55*

‘Blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfilment of what was spoken to her by the Lord.’

I live my Advent in the womb of Mary.  
And on one night when a great star swings free  
from its high mooring and walks down the sky  
to be the dot above the Christus I,  
I shall be born of her by blessed grace.  
I wait in Mary-darkness, faith's walled place,  
with hope's expectance of nativity.

I knew for long she carried and fed me,  
guarded and loved me, though I could not see.  
But only now, with inward jubilee,  
I come upon earth's most amazing knowledge:  
*Someone is hidden in this dark with me.*  
[Words from a poem by Jessica Powers.]

We have come to this fourth Sunday of Advent. Christmas is so close we can almost touch it – perhaps scarily close, for those of us still with preparations to make, presents to wrap and cards to write! And yet, we're not quite there: there is still one week of Advent left, one week of this most precious time in the church year. It's a season of watching and waiting, of resting with the prophets and the faithful men and women of scripture who trusted in the promised coming of their Saviour. It's a time when we too can hope, without any fear of disappointment, that, even among all the uncertainties of our present age, Our Lord and Saviour will come to us at Christmas. Not with the fanfare of a great king or with the majesty of the rich and powerful, but in the coming of a tiny baby, born in the poverty of a

stable, to an unmarried mother, and placed in a manger.

One week to go. In our Gospel reading today, the Church gives us what I think is a very helpful model for Advent watching and waiting. It's one of my very favourite parts of Luke's Gospel: the story of Mary's Visitation journey to her cousin Elizabeth. Although Elizabeth is beyond childbearing age, she is miraculously expecting a child who will grow up to be John the Baptist. And Mary, who is betrothed to Joseph but not yet married, has just received that great invitation from God which is the Annunciation. The angel Gabriel has come to tell her of God's plan for her to be the mother of Jesus. 'Here am I,' she says, 'the servant of the Lord. Let it be with me according to your word.'

And what does Mary do next? Having given her full and unwavering consent to the will of God, she turns on her heel and goes to see her cousin Elizabeth, in 'a Judean town in the hill country.' Tradition locates this town within the district of Ein Karem, which is eighty miles as the crow flies from Nazareth. If you ever get the chance to go to the Holy Land, you can go and visit it. I'm told it's a winding, treacherous journey to attempt by coach: now imagine doing it on foot. Place yourself, for a moment, in Mary's position. You are an unmarried young girl, who has just received news that you are to bear the Son of God, with no husband or property of your own, and the first thing you do is walk eighty miles, alone, to be with your pregnant cousin.

It's an extraordinary act of generosity, friendship and love. We might expect Mary to be concerned with her own situation, with how Joseph and her family will react to the news, with practical concerns about bearing and raising the Son of God. But Mary's first thought is, instead, of her cousin. Extraordinary generosity, to be sure, but I think, also one of comfort: Despite biological impossibility, Elizabeth was carrying in her womb John the Baptist, the prophet who would grow up to proclaim the kingdom of God. And so Elizabeth might well be the only person alive who understood something of how Mary felt.

And yet, even as she arrives, Elizabeth makes an astonishing confession of faith which marks the two women as distinct: she calls her 'blessed among women', and addresses her as 'the mother of my Lord.' The Mother of God; the *Theotokos*, God-bearer, as she is known to the Eastern Orthodox. The child leaps in her womb even as Elizabeth is filled with the Holy Spirit: because the coming of our Saviour provokes joy, celebration, dancing, even among the unborn.

I love this Gospel reading for a number of reasons: for what it teaches us about

faithful service to God, for the incredible song of praise, the Magnificat, which Mary sings immediately after Elizabeth's greeting, and which the choir sang for us today in place of the psalm. I love it because Christianity can so often feel like a patriarchal faith, but this Gospel puts women centre-stage in proclaiming the coming of Christ. While Elizabeth's husband Zechariah is struck dumb for his disbelief in the words of an angel, and while Joseph is a faithful but silent presence throughout all four Gospels, here we have two women, two friends, coming together to express aloud their sheer delight in the joy of God. A joy which will upend all earthly understandings of power and kingship and majesty, which will cast down the mighty from their thrones and raise up the poor and humble, filling them with good things.

We have much to learn from Our Lady and Elizabeth. Mary, in her uncompromising selflessness, and in her simple, faithful trust in God, gives herself fully to her Lord and to others, to bearing the Word made flesh and to proclaiming the good works of God in the Magnificat. The Annunciation, and then the Visitation. One enables the other: and the joy of her vocation is not just for her alone but must be shared, first with her cousin Elizabeth, the first to recognise the Christ as Lord, and then with the whole world. And Elizabeth shares Mary's pure, trusting faith in God: as her child leaps in her womb she joyfully hails as blessed both Mary and her Son and Saviour. With Mary, she places all of her trust, all of her hope in the fulfilment of what was spoken to her by the Lord.

May we, in these last days before Christmas, live our Advent in the womb of Mary, sharing these blessed Saints' joyful trust in God's faithfulness to his eternal promises. Amen.