

The Blessed Virgin Mary – 11 August, 2024

Message – Encourage one another

Creator, Redeemer, and Giver of Life, revealed to us through servant love, open our hearts and minds, to your love and grace. **Amen.**

In a world where, infamously, men felt it appropriate to give thanks to God that they were not born as a woman, it is remarkable that the first two people to proclaim Jesus as their saviour are Elizabeth and Mary. A young woman and an old woman exemplify faith, where Zechariah, the priest, the one who should have been most ready to meet with God, he was after all in the temple in the Holy of Holies, demonstrates an initial utter absence of faith, though he does eventually get there after the birth of his son.

In both Hebrew and Greek thought, so ingrained was the cultural belief that women were inferior to men that the role of women in the gospel and in the life of Jesus led some men to refute the gospel.

That women were an integral part of Jesus's life and ministry has survived shows the degree to which it really was a characteristic part of Christ's ministry. Even Mark, in his brevity, and Matthew, taking a traditional Jewish perspective, have plenty of evidence of the absolute inclusion of women.

Given the cultural background, there are good grounds for thinking that Luke's gospel comes closer to the reality of Christ's ministry. There is a repeated equality in Luke's gospel stories of women balanced with stories of men that

is both revolutionary and surely reflect the reality of God dwelling on earth as one of us.

Within the Magnificat, our gospel reading today and a metrical version of which we sang as our opening hymn, is a revolutionary tone:

*God has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.
God has brought down the powerful from their thrones.
God has sent the rich away empty.*

*God has shown strength with his arm.
God has lifted up the lowly.
God has filled the hungry with good things.*

God's mercy is for those who fear him.

While it may not always feel like it, particularly in the current financial climate, we are among the powerful and rich. Yet, as Christ clearly states, all things are possible for God and so it is that God's mercy is available to all of us.

Fear of God is a nuanced term. It is about acknowledging God's nature and power and our relationship as creatures of the Creator. The love and grace of God drive out all fear. We can rely on, trust and have faith in God and in God's love and grace. The depth of that love was shown in the life, death, and resurrection, of Christ.

In the power of the Holy Spirit, God within Elizabeth and within Mary, they understood the significance of what was happening in their lives and all that was to come. They knew that they were serving God's purpose and they trusted that they simply needed to follow God's will for them.

For most of us our calling is not that clear. Even if an angel

did appear to us, I suspect that most of us would respond more like Zechariah than Mary. Our first response would be not to believe that what we were being told was even possible, never mind that it would happen to us.

When we take time to look back on our lives, there are often remarkable things that have come together that seem completely improbable. They can be put down to being simple coincidence, though as many a TV detective says, 'I don't believe in coincidences.' So how do we explain them, they become God-incidences.

Most of God's work in the world is undoubtedly subtle. God continues to give us freewill and does not overwhelm us and leave us without any choice but to obey. As Thomas Merton puts it, *'And I know that if I [desire to please you,] you will lead me by the right road, though I may know nothing about it.'* (Thomas Merton's prayer for discernment)

As a community, we need to encourage this desire to please God in one another, just as Mary and Elizabeth encouraged and affirmed it in each other. For each of us the question is what do we believe that God is calling us to do to please God today, both collectively and as individuals.

In the context of the revolutionary pronouncements of the Magnificat, the revolutionary nature of Christ's ministry, the revolutionary activities of the early church... for those of you thinking that Saint Paul is a bit of a blot on the landscape, I remind you that he was the one who said, *'There is no longer Jew or Greek; there is no longer slave or free; there is no longer male and female, for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.'* (Gal 3:28) and he has no less than twelve

co-workers who are women, in this revolutionary context, we should be enabling others to do extraordinary things, things that challenge our way of thinking but which we can see express the person's gifts and their love for God.

The body of Christ is called to help people reach their full potential. And, sometimes, that will mean breaking the social norms and, dare I say it, contemporary church norms.

There is still work to be done in our church, even on gender equality. We consecrated the first woman bishop but our track record since is not so good. Currently, none of our diocesan bishops are women. We are failing to use all of the gifts that God has given to our church in the best possible way. We are squandering God's gifts.

If we reflect on the masculine-feminine divide, and on the many other ways in which both society and church culture limit what people can do, including seeing the privilege which we too often fail to recognise is a part of our life and our opportunities, if we reflect on these things, we will see that the call of the church is to be a place of nurturing that enables people to be all that they can be.

So how do we build one another up. Offering words of encouragement is a great start, but even before that, simply walking alongside someone in their journey, being fully present is a gift that is needed before any words.

Our challenge as the body of Christ is to build up one another, both those who are like us and those who are nothing like us. As you go from this service, who will you encourage and nurture today, so that their gifts may flourish and bear the fruit that God has made uniquely theirs.