

Sunday 23<sup>rd</sup> December 2012 – Advent 4 – St Aidan's/Wesley

Theme: "Two women of faith – Elizabeth and Mary"

Reading: Luke 1: 39-55

Text: And Mary said: "My soul glorifies the Lord and my spirit

*rejoices in God my Saviour...."*

### Introduction

Today we have Mary's song of joy, the Magnificat, (this name comes from the Latin Vulgate version of our Scriptures and is the Latin word for 'glorifies') as our Gospel reading and prior to that is the wonderful interaction between Elizabeth and Mary.

This hymn of jubilation and praise is one of four hymns preserved by Luke in the first two chapters of his Gospel and is certainly the best known. (*the others are found in Luke 1: 68-79, 2:14 and 2:29-32*)

Women played a pivotal role in early Christianity and some traditions fail to remember this. Elizabeth and Mary are at centre stage when Luke begins to unfold his drama of salvation. Luke from the outset places women central to the telling of the Gospel story. This is quite different to most of the Hebrew Scriptures where women were part of a man's 'goods and chattels' and were seen as second class citizens.

Hence it is incredible to see the powerful role these 'nobodies' play in Luke's Gospel which indicates Luke's theology that women were close to the heart of the Gospel and there is an equality in the sight of God between men and women.

Writing on Luke, Professor Rosemary Radford Ruether says:

*"Poor women and despised men, widows, unclean women, prostitutes, Samaritans and the Syro-Phoenician woman: these are those in whom, the messianic prophet Jesus find the faith that is absent among the 'righteous of Israel'. The story of the widow's mite, the forgiveness of the prostitute who has faith, the healing of the woman with the flow of blood, the defence of Mary of Magdala's right to discipleship, are among the Lucan stories that lift up the typology of women as people of faith."*

Luke reminds us that a new age has dawned and for Jesus, women have a large part to play. God has 'exalted those of low degree' in his kingdom.

### Who began the church?

In his writing around this topic, Bruce Prewer suggests the following playful hypothesis, to use his words. He says:

*"There is a sense in which Mary and Elizabeth are the first church. When those two pregnant women got together in Elizabeth's home, they are the first people to come together in the name of Messiah Jesus. They are the first of those who gathered by proclamation of the Gospel in the power of the Holy Spirit. Theologians tend to differ as to when the church first started. Some say the Day of Pentecost. Others say it was when the risen Christ appeared to the disciples behind locked doors. Some suggest it was when Jesus called the first disciples.... But I reckon Mary and Elizabeth have good credentials. They are the ones who first hear the Gospel Word and believed that the messianic age had dawned with this little baby growing in Mary's womb. They believed that the Messiah was coming, the one who is Christ and Saviour. They are the ones who receive the word and obey it. They are the doers of the word. They are both filled with the Holy Spirit and break out into praise and joy."*

Hence there is a case for putting these women at the beginning of the worldly church and not men!!!

### Reflection on our own faith journeying

I have mentioned before that in my early years it was my mother, and to a lesser extent my Godmother, who were formative in my personal faith. While this is not the pattern for everyone, there are many who have faith because of women of faith who have had an incredibly positive impact on their lives. For a moment, think about who have been, and may still be, people of faith that have encouraged you in your own faith journeying. (*quiet time of reflection*)

Give thanks to God for their impact on your life. (*time of prayer & praise*)

### Love came down at Christmas

In the book “Shine on, star of Bethlehem – A worship resource for Advent, Christmas and Epiphany” compiled by Geoffrey Duncan (Pilgrim Press - pp102/3) I found this lovely meditation based on the two women of faith, Mary and Elizabeth. Let me share it with you.

*Love came down at Christmas –*

*Beginning with the love of two women for their children:*

*Elizabeth with her cherished child, born in old age;*

*Mary with her new hopes and dreams, born of a meeting between an angel and a young girl – hardly more than a child herself.*

*Love came down at Christmas*

*in the hearts of an old woman and a young girl. Together they recognise the wonder of a God who uses them – the barren one, the untried girl – to overturn the powers that be, with their hard eyes and their harsh judgements, their respect for wealth and their contempt of the poor.*

*Love came down at Christmas*

*in the lives of two women: the clear-eyed love that says Yes I will do what you ask of me; the understanding love that recognises the life of God in the pregnant teenager and greets her with joy.*

*Today, God of love, we remember the stories of all the people who met your love at Bethlehem and recognised your presence among ordinary folk.*

*We remember the ones who said Yes to God. Mary who bore him and Joseph who loved her and her child; the ones who recognised need and offered shelter; the ones who recognised the importance of the time and went to look for the baby in the manger; the ones who travelled in the starlight looking for a king.*

*God of yesterday, today and forever, help us to see ourselves as we hear their stories. Show us how to say Yes to you whatever the cost. Help us to recognise your life in the weak and the vulnerable ones we meet day after day. Teach us to look for you where you are to be found, among the ordinary folk: taking shelter with the refugee; seeking asylum with the displaced ones.*

*And as we travel our life's road, show us how to offer our plenty to your need, our worship to your living presence and our mortal weakness to your redeeming cross. ....” (Heather Pencavel)*

### Conclusion

Today we celebrate the joy of the two pregnant women, Mary and Elizabeth, sharing their faith together and praising God. We celebrate the fact that God uses ordinary people to fulfil the messianic mission to the world. We celebrate that God uses people of faith, in particular in the Gospel today, women, to further the kingdom. We celebrate the coming of Jesus again and with Mary in her song of joy we too can say:

*“My soul glorifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour”. Amen!*