

## GOD IS PRESENT IN JESUS

Micah 5. 2-5a  
Hebrews 10. 5-10  
Luke 1. 39-55

I speak to you in the name of  the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.  
Amen.

Today's appointed gospel reading, which concludes the four-Sunday Advent season, is St Luke's beautiful account of what is known as the Visitation: a pregnant Mary goes to the house of her kinsfolk Zechariah and Elizabeth. Elizabeth is also pregnant. Immediately, we notice that there are two pregnancy stories paralleling each other in this reading; that of our Lord and that of John the Baptist.

You may be surprised, however, to hear that there is also a third pregnancy story we are intended to see in today's gospel; and any Jewish reader of Luke's account late in the last decade of the first century, when it was written, would quickly recall it. That story is the ancient story of Abraham and Sarah (Gen 18. 9-15). It shapes the way we read and understand the Visitation.

The story of Zechariah and Elizabeth is a re-telling and re-casting of the story of Abraham and Sarah: in each instance, a woman beyond the age of natural child-bearing conceives by the grace of God through human means. The child produced is a leader of the people of Israel: Isaac, in the case of Abraham and Sarah; and John the Baptist, in the example of Zechariah and Elizabeth.

As I mentioned, Luke wrote his gospel in the ninth decade of the first century. Like the other Evangelists and gospel authors, Luke is making a specific theological statement about Jesus. Luke is saying that Isaac and John the Baptist have miraculous births; that each has an heroic destiny of singular importance in the history of Israel; but that each also has a human father. But note the difference with Mary, says Luke:

her pregnancy is by Divine fatherhood, by the Holy Spirit; and this is attested by Elizabeth when she says, ‘Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb’. Christ is unlike Isaac and John the Baptist. He is different. He is greater. According to Luke’s understanding, our Lord is both human and divine at birth, and therefore unlike anyone who has come before him. Whilst Isaac and John the Baptist had heroic destinies that were important in the history of Israel, Jesus shall fulfil a unique role in the history of God’s people, as Saviour, Redeemer and Messiah. Like Isaac and John the Baptist, sacrifice will play a part in his story; yet again, his sacrifice will be different, as he will be revealed as the final and perfect offering.

A common thread in the three paralleling stories is that in each of the three pregnancy accounts, the covenant relationship between God and his people is about to undergo change, renewal and re-creation. Something old is ending. Something new is beginning. And we shall see that this applies to us, too.

All of the other gospel writers agree with Luke that God is present in Christ; that the Divine is present in our Lord, who was fully man and God; and that this was revealed in his life as he lived it in human history. But there is another side of the coin. All of the gospel writers also agree that human beings (that is, people like you and me) can know the presence of God in our own lives as well. We, who are part of God’s people, share in this experience and this truth.

Allow me to say a few things about the experience and truth of the presence of God in our lives.

Firstly, the presence and experience of God is always (in a sense) a mystery. And as with all mysteries, no words or descriptions can fully capture the truth of that experience. Words can only point to truth, but can never explain or contain it fully.

And Luke, in the gospel passage that we are considering this morning, paints for us a picture of the mystery of God. He is pointing us to the truth about God, who always surpasses human understanding, and whose presence is blessedness. God is both absolute and uncontrollable; but he is the transcendent God of love as well, rather than the God of anger and vengeance and fear.

Secondly, the mystery of the presence and experience of this God who is love, calls us out of our life and more and more into the wonder of the Divine life. When God calls us, or when he intervenes in our lives, he summons us to live and act in faith, a faith where impossible things become possible. In our appointed gospel passage, Luke gives us (directly or indirectly) the examples of Sarah, of Elizabeth, and more importantly, of Mary; flesh and blood women who show us what it means to turn one's will and one's life over to the care of God. Each of these three women, in their surrender to the will of God, discovers that life is now hid with God in a plan; life is now cast into a future that God will unfold in the midst of the life and history of his people.

Thirdly, with the presence and experience of God, and with the divine intervention in each human story, comes wonder and rejoicing, the fullness of a gladsome heart and spirit. In this morning's gospel, Luke is telling us that with surrender to God comes our fullest identity and happiness, the discovery of *who* we are and *whose* we are. Our future, therefore, is to walk with God in hope, because God has the final word on human history, rather than man.

And finally, as a result of the presence and experience of God and of surrender to his love, one is never the same. Quite literally, we are transformed, and never deformed. Luke is telling us that Our Lady, like Eve, is the mother of a new creation. Like Mary, when we die to ourselves, and when we surrender to the grace of God, God will bring forth something greater, more enduring than what we have lost. And

in today's gospel that is called the Kingdom of Heaven. John the Baptist is the one who will announce it. Jesus is the Kingdom come.

These four things about the experience and truth of the presence of God apply to us. They are essential elements of our messianic Advent experience, and of our day-to-day lives all year long, outside of Advent. You and I know – or can know – the presence of God in our lives in a way that is at once mysterious, faith-changing, joyful and transforming. You and I have the possibility of continuing in the great tradition set by Sarah, Elizabeth and Mary. You and I can know that God is intimately and lovingly involved in our own personal lives. In fact, he is so involved in our lives that he has sent his Son to us; and we can be assured that Christ's kingdom and his final reign are coming amongst us.

It was faith in this certainty that spurred our Lady, the God-bearer, to burst into a song of praise. Her *Magnificat*, her song of hope, is given by Luke in the passage that we are considering this morning. In this song, which is the Mother of God's expression of faith, she rejoices in the fulness and the eternal life of God. In this song, Mary proclaims that God alone is her soul's joyous beginning and end.

The *Magnificat* also applies to us: it is our song as well as that of the Blessed Mother; it is the joyful hymn of the faithful, that long line of men and women who have come to believe in the mercy and goodness of God; a God who is now amongst us and for us; a God who tells us that we should live no longer in fear and violence, but in hope and peace; a God in whom and from whom we should expect great mercy.

On this last Advent Sunday, may we receive God's peace and hope. May we expect great things. Our Lord is coming amongst us now! Let us greet him this Christmas in thanksgiving. *Magnificat!* Amen.