

Homily for people and parishes...

Bishop Cam Venables – Sunday 22nd December 2024, Advent 4

Readings: Micah 5:2-5a

Hebrews 10:5-10

Song of Mary (APBA p31)

Luke 1:39-45

Today, we're just three days out from Christmas and in the Gospel we meet two women who are portrayed at the heart of the Christmas story. Indeed, the only 'voices' we hear in this Gospel passage are from these women, and these women are each named.

Mary was a young girl – maybe fourteen or fifteen years old – and she had had an encounter with an angel who had told her that God wanted to become a human being through her having a baby. The angel explained that her older relative, Elizabeth, was also, unexpectedly, pregnant. The Gospel suggests that Mary 'went with haste' to the town where Elizabeth lived.

I wonder if 'went with haste' is code for running – or walking quickly? Mary 'went with haste' we can assume because she wanted some confirmation that what she had seen and heard was true. Discernment is really important – sometimes we have a sense that God wants us to do something, but we're not sure if it's our imagination, our wishful thinking, or our ego! How can we discern and confirm that this direction is really from God? One way is to share with a trusted other, or trusted others, and share it with them for prayer and feedback. For Mary she wanted to talk to Elizabeth, and she wanted to see if Elizabeth's situation was as the angel had described to her. So, understandably, she 'went with haste...'!

The Gospel suggests that when Mary greeted Elizabeth the baby in Elizabeth's womb jumped and filled with the Holy Spirit, Elizabeth said the words that have become so familiar "*Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb...*" In response Mary is remembered offering words that have been turned into a song, "*My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant. Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed; for the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name. His mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation. He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty. He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy, according to the promise he made to our ancestors, to Abraham and to his descendants forever.*"

These words are beautifully crafted and have become familiar to the church over two Millennia as the 'Magnificat', or, 'Song of Mary'. Unsurprisingly, the words have inspired popular hymns like Timothy Dudley-Smith's, "*Tell out my soul, the greatness of the Lord, unnumbered blessing give my spirit voice; tender to me the promise of his word; in God my Saviour, shall my heart rejoice...*'

However, I think we would be mistaken to think that the poorly educated, fifteen year old, Mary actually said these richly structured words. We know that no one was present with a dictaphone recording things as they happened! Indeed, Luke's Gospel was written, most Biblical scholars think, about fifty five years after Jesus had lived on earth, so it's fair to think that these words are what a Christian community thought Mary would have said. Given that the Gospel is attributed to a highly educated man called Luke then the words of the 'Magnificat' could be understood as words written by an educated adult man, saying what he would have said had he been in the same circumstance. As a community of faith we certainly have an

understanding that this writing would have been guided by the Holy Spirit, but they would not have been 'the words' spoken by Mary.

We can never know those exact words – and we don't have to! What we have in the Gospels is rich and can be used by God's Spirit to inspire and guide. But, it's helpful to bring our imagination and our intellect to Scripture reading and interpretation, and there are poets and song-writers who can help us in this work. One example, in so many, is an album of songs called, 'Music Inspired by The Story' which was released in 2011. In this project a significant number of contemporary Christian music artists were invited to write songs that they imagined certain Biblical characters would have sung. Not surprisingly one of the characters was Mary. The song for Mary is titled 'Be born in me' and it was written by Nichole Nordeman and Bernie Herms.

The song richly expresses vulnerability and intimacy, together with faith and determination. And there is an invitation in the refrain 'be born in me' for this to be a prayer of faith not only in the life of a young girl long ago, but in our own lives. I invite you to close your eyes now and imagine Mary speaking these words – even singing these words - to herself, and to God.

*Everything inside me cries for order. Everything inside me wants to hide
Is this the shadow of an angel or a warrior? If God is pleased with me, why am I so terrified?
Someone tell me I am only dreaming. Somehow help me see with Heaven's eyes.
And before my head agrees, my heart is on its knees
Holy is He. Blessed am I.*

*Be born in me. Be born in me.
Trembling heart, somehow I believe, that You chose me.
I'll hold you in the beginning, you will hold me in the end,
Every moment in the middle, make my heart your Bethlehem, e born in me*

*All this time we've waited for the promise. All this time You've waited for my arms
Did You wrap yourself inside the unexpected, so we might know that Love would go that far?*

*I am not brave. I'll never be.
The only thing my heart can offer is a vacancy
I'm just a girl! Nothing more.
But I am willing, I am Yours*

*Be born in me, be born in me
Trembling heart, somehow I believe that You chose me
I'll hold you in the beginning, You will hold me in the end
Every moment in the middle, make my heart your Bethlehem be born in me*

For a moving rendition of these lyrics please click on this link:
[Francesca Battistelli - Be Born In Me \(From "The Story"\) - YouTube](#)

Let's pray...

Holy God, we give thanks for the gift of our lives and the gift of your love. We give thanks also for the way that you met Mary and Elizabeth in the midst of their everyday lives, and for the ways that you meet us in ours. Through your Spirit, nurture within us a daily longing to recognise and share, your love and gift. We pray in the name of the One whose birth we soon celebrate, Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.