



Kirknewton and East Calder Parish Church of Scotland

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Date: 12th December 2010

Sermon: Rev Dr André Groenewald

Reading: Luke 1:39-56

Background to the reading

The reading this morning is quite remarkable in the sense that it shadows some well-known Old Testament stories like Abraham and Sarah as a parallel to the story of Zachariah and Elizabeth and Hannah's prayer to Mary's song. Mary also uses the language of the Psalms in the way she expresses her joy in the Lord. Mary's song is also called the "Magnificat" because the name "Magnificat" comes from the opening word in the Latin Vulgate's translation of Mary's hymn.

Luke tells us that Mary could not wait to get to her relative Elizabeth. But it was not so simple. The journey from Nazareth to the hill country of Judea, probably south of Jerusalem may have taken three to five days, depending on the precise location of Elizabeth's home. So just imagine a woman in her first trimester travelling all this way on foot! It was also very dangerous for a woman to travel on her own.

Most probably her parents would allow her to go with a caravan consisting of other people. Luke does not tell us to which city. Maybe he wanted to emphasize the close similarity of the story of Hannah who was from the "hill country" of Ephraim.

Then when Mary saw Elizabeth she greeted her. Greetings were normally blessings meant to bestow peace. And then the baby in Elizabeth moved once he heard Mary's voice. It was then that Elizabeth was also moved by the Holy Spirit. The Greek text says the baby "leaped" in her. Like dancing, leaping was an expression of joy. And then just like the prophets in the Old Testament she proclaimed with a loud voice that Mary is the "most blessed." She instinctively knew that Mary was pregnant without Mary saying one word. She also knew by divine insight that this baby came from God. According to contemporary Jewish

ideas a woman's greatness was measured by the greatness of the children that she bore. Mary was blessed because of the son she was carrying.

I can just imagine Mary's relief – to think that someone else knew and confirmed what was going on in her life - a relative she could relate and speak to. Then Elizabeth utters another blessing for the fact that Mary had faith just like Abraham a long time ago to know that God will keep his word.

It is no wonder that Mary starts to sing a song of joy, relief and thanksgiving. In her song she emphasizes the greatness, justice and mercy of God just like Hannah did a long time ago when she celebrated the fact that the Lord answered her prayer in giving her a baby boy SAMUEL. The Old Testament spoke of those who obeyed God, especially the prophets, as God's servants. It also emphasized God's exalting the humble and reveals the importance ancient culture placed on one's honour and name.

Mary PRAISES God for his faithfulness, Holiness and righteousness. According to the Old Testament, God's "arm" would save his people and "scatter" those who do not obey him. The Lord knows everything, even what goes on in the "hearts" of people. He knows their inmost thoughts. No-one can hide from him.

The principle that God exalts the humble and casts down the proud was common in the Old Testament. "Filling the hungry" comes from Psalm 107:9, where God helps those in distress, because he is merciful.

God had promised to be faithful to his people Israel forever, because of the eternal covenant he had made by oath with their ancestor Abraham. Israel is God's "servant" according to the Old Testament.

Mary stayed with Elizabeth for about three months. It is uncertain why Luke mentioned this. She could have been present at the birth of John taken that she got the message when Elizabeth was in her sixth month of pregnancy plus the three months she spend with her! But we do not really know. We can just speculate.

I think Luke wants to emphasize that there must be joy and thankfulness every time one realizes how almighty and merciful God is just like Elizabeth and Mary did! There must be an awareness of how finite humans are in relation to God's Infinity. And yes to know for sure to God even the impossible is possible!

Amen

SERMON

The text for the sermon is:

⁴⁵ Blessed is she who has believed that what the Lord has said to her will be accomplished!

Indeed.

Mary was indeed a woman of great faith in the Lord. I think to her it must have been quite a rollercoaster ride with regard to her emotions. But she believed and trusted in the Lord.

I can just imagine her journey to her relative – all the time thinking is this really happening? Is it really true? - all the time wrestling, having sleepless nights and then the relief when her relative Elizabeth sees her and confirms everything that she was wondering about. It is no wonder that one almost feels the excitement mounting when reading this encounter between the two women. Elizabeth's joy and trust to know that the impossible is possible to God, that she will be a mother even in her old age just like Sarah a long time ago. Can you imagine how she must have felt when her baby was moving when he was just hearing the voice of Mary?

I think it is only understandable that Mary sings a song with joy and excitement for indeed the Lord has done great things! He did everything just as the angel told her. To her it was clear as crystal that God does as He promises.

And we – do we still believe in the providence and promises of God?

It seems as if we sometimes lose track of God's promises and the true reality of Him attending to all our needs. And in more than one way God often surprises us with His timely interventions. I mean just think of all the church activities and things that we planned for this season and how many we had to cancel because of the severity of the weather. God "surprised" us all and in a real way showed us who is really in control.

And I think this is something that Mary experienced when Elizabeth confirmed all the promises God made to her namely that God is in control. He will make it happen just as He said. Everything is possible because He is God.

This is a season of faith. A season that asks us to believe the impossible. But if we believe God did the impossible, we can believe that God will still do the impossible and that will bring more joy to this Christmas season than any present you can unwrap.

The world may think it is Santa who is responsible for all good things. Indeed God may “surprise” them by the real miracles that Santa cannot do like controlling the weather, or life and death...

May we have faith this Christmas to know that everything is possible to God because He reigns for ever and ever. And Yes may we leap with joy this Christmas every time we think of the mercy and love of God.

Amen