

REFLECTING ON GOD'S WORD

Reading: Luke 1:39-56 (NT page 1026)

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 Zechariah 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 song.

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 God always keeps His promises. And yes to know for sure to God even the impossible is possible!

Amen

SERMON

The text for the sermon is:

v45 "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? Can you imagine how wonderful it must have been to be able to talk to someone who could actually talk back to her? I mean to say it must have been hard for her that her husband Zechariah could not speak! Maybe for him it was a blessing too! I can remember well how every word I spoke to

Nanda when she was expecting both boys, came out wrong...and deary me, I had to pay the price! But still, it must have been so special for her to relate to someone who was in the same boat she was. She was old and childless. Mary was young and not married. Both women were "shameful" in the eyes of their society.

But despite their predicament, they believed in God. They believed His promises. And a sign of this faith is evident in both women, especially in Mary's song. And this is what faith is: to have hope in God's promises when there is no signs of hope!

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 us – 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.

God promised all of us His new kingdom where there will be no more tears or sorrow or pain. You and I can have the living hope that we have a future with God. You and I can look beyond this earth and know that our true destiny is waiting. We do not have

to be feeling hopeless. No let us sing songs of hope like Mary did despite our circumstances.

A few days before Nanda's mother died I asked her if she is scared to die. With her bright brown eyes, she looked at me as if I have lost it and said: "No, I am going to heaven". I also remember that I prayed for my grandmother just before she died. And then I felt the presence of God in that room. I said to everyone sitting around the room, that God is present and that He has come for her. And yes she died peaceful. She just slipped away....I still experience this often in my ministry.

So when we think of death, when we think of all our unanswered questions, when we think about our dire circumstances, we must not feel hopeless and alone. We must seize the moment and sing songs of joy because God has promised us that He will be with us until the end of time. We are never far away from His loving care, mercy and grace.

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.

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