

**Sermon: Rev Susanna Pain
Sunday 20 December 2009
Advent 4C**

**READING
Luke 1:39-45**

Mary and Elizabeth

On this Sunday before Christmas, when our waiting is almost over (how many more sleeps? 5...), we hear the story of two women, one of them Jesus' mother, Mary, the other, the mother of John the Baptist, Elizabeth. We hear the story of these two women meeting.

Again this week the main action happens far away from the centre of political power, this time in a tiny village in the hills. It is a simple domestic scene – carrying the seeds of a movement that will change the world – of a concept – incarnation – God embodied, which changes the way we know God, of a challenge to act in ways that empower and heal.

I want to let you in on a secret.

In a newly renovated chapel at the Hermitage in Mittagong, in the Visitation Chapel, there is a largish painting by Michael Galovic.

I spent a lot of time with that painting at the Parish Retreat two years ago. It is golden sepia colours with splashes of coloured paint. It depicts two figures embracing, their intersecting halves forming a heart. Their cheeks are touching, arms entwined around each other.

This simple picture moved me deeply. It shows Mary and Elizabeth, older and younger woman, both pregnant, one, before her time, barely out of childhood herself, the other almost in menopause, after years of shame and barrenness, fertile, both pregnant with possibility.

This hug is a mutual embrace of great pleasure and delight.

Their pregnancies are the obvious link between them, but there is more.

Deeper mysteries are hidden in the intersection of their bodies and their holds:

- the mandorla sacred space, the intersection of what they have in common
- more in common than different
- yes, both are pregnant
- yes, both are women, both blessed
- yes, they are related.

What is the core? the heart of their relationship, this young and old woman?
What is at the centre of two women embracing?

The action is taking place on the domestic front, between two women and their unborn children. Their greeting, this meeting, holds all the promise, all the possibility that God's presence offers.

Two women, pregnant. Both children, as yet unborn, yet involved in the meeting of two humble, trusting women, willing to say 'yes' to God and to be part of the action.

What is this story for me? It is inclusiveness, young and old are bearers of God's possibility.

They meet in mutual respect, joy, fear even. They are not alone.

God is growing in them.

Yet they are not divorced from history. Mary echoes Hannah's song. Hannah, the mother of Samuel, way way back – Hannah who, when praying out loud in distress, is criticised by a priest, but then is granted her request – a child Samuel the prophet (like John).

Blessed are you among women,
Blessed is the fruit of your womb,
Blessed is he who believes the promise, says Elizabeth.

I offer then a blessing to you, men and women, in this place:

'Blessed are you who believe the promise' because you live peace, joy, excitement, expectation about what God is doing in your life.

I have sat with this story during my convalescence from my operation two months ago.

As someone who has never physically given birth – who is barren, and now even the remotest possibility of conceiving is taken away – this story is challenging, with its focus on two pregnant women.

As a person who all my life has wanted, like Elizabeth or Hannah, to conceive, who has prayed fervently, and whose prayers have not been answered in the way I expected, what is this story to me?

As a womb-less woman I have to look elsewhere to find my creativity, to see where God is being born in me, to know God's possibilities for me, to find the places, the discipline, the experiences that nourish the soul and allow life to grow.

Matthew Fox (p.152 *Handbook for the Soul*) writes:

'Nourishing the soul means throwing ourselves into our yearning to beauty and goodness, for community and connection with others.'

It also means struggling, standing up to injustice, and paying whatever price is necessary to right a wrong.'

Fox adds: 'A fellow with AIDS said the day he found out he was going to die was the day he began to live – Don't wait to really live!'

So, what does it mean to really live? What gives you joy?

Matthew Fox suggests that the following are key elements to consider:

creativity
ritual
mystery
looking for and enjoying beauty
and work.

What gives you joy and enables the birth of possibilities?

Elizabeth said:

'Blessed are you, who believed what God said, believed every word would come true!'

And Mary said (in the words of Eugene H Peterson, *The Message Bible*):

'I'm bursting with God-news;
I'm dancing the song of my Saviour God,
God took one good look at me, and look what happened –
I'm the most fortunate woman on earth!
What God has done for me will never be forgotten,
The God whose very name is holy, set apart from all others.

God's mercy flows in wave after wave
on those who are in awe before God.
God bared God's arm and showed God's strength,
scattered the bluffing braggarts.
God knocked tyrants off their high horses, pulled victims out of the mud.
The starving poor sat down to a banquet;
The callous rich were left out in the cold.
God embraced God's chosen child, Israel;
God remembered and piled on the mercies, piled them high.

It's exactly what God promised,
beginning with Abraham and right up to now.'

(*Seasons of the Spirit, Congregational Life* Advent, Christmas, Epiphany, 2009, p. 52)

Mary's song, like Hannah's grows out of the conception of a promised child. Both songs praise God for new ways that fulfil ancient traditions of covenant.

Both songs celebrate God's actions for the poor and vulnerable. Like these songs Luke's gospel celebrates the God who comes to do justice and exercise mercy.

Those who are lowly will be lifted up, those who are haughty will be brought low. Such reversals sung by these women will be revealed in Jesus' ministry.

A foreign Samaritan woman will serve as the example of neighbour (10:25-37).

Women will exercise ministry (8:1-3).

Prodigals and stay-at-homes alike will be embraced by love (15:11-32).

Luke's beatitudes (6:20-26) link Jesus' teaching with his mother's song.

Mary calls God 'Saviour'. Only one other verse in Luke uses this title. Shepherds are told in Luke 2:11 of the birth of a Saviour. Several inscriptions from this era bestow the title of 'Saviour' on the Roman emperor Augustus – one of them declares him 'Saviour of the world'.

This gospel in contrast places 'Saviour' in Mary's song, and in the angel's news 'for all the people'. In doing so, Luke addresses his community with a subtle word of resistance. In an empire that pressed for worship of the emperor, Luke avowed that Saviour in a title that belongs to God.

Mary sings a revolutionary song to a God who comes to save – to heal, to empower.

For whom is this good news?

Is this good news for you?

Ann Siddall muses:

Of all the ways that God could have self-revealed, becoming embodied in human kind was probably one of the most radical and risky choices. As we celebrate the meaning of Christmas, let us take time to consider this embodied life, through which the things of earth and the things of heaven found a meeting place.

Incarnate in Christ, God experienced heat and cold, anxiety and joy, tiredness and vitality, the tenderness of human touch and the violence of human aggression. And our own bodies, so often ignored or repressed, became hallowed for all time as expressions of the sacred.

Let us then, consider how to live fully and abundantly this embodied life, understanding its limitations and exploring its possibilities, listening to it, celebrating it and cherishing it. Let us try not to push our bodies too hard

or let them grown soft and slack; let us hear when they do not need more food and listen attentively when they ask for rest.

May we see the things of god in the feel of cool water on hot skin, in the firm grip of a handshake, the lines of age and wisdom, and the smell of rain. And let us see that beauty of spirit can shine strongly through frailty and disease, that brokenness is not to be hidden, and that feet that want to dance ought to do so.

Let us laugh with delight when a body matures, or expresses love, or walks in rhythm with our breathing. And let us listen to the wisdom of this creation that is so meticulously wired for communication.

Let us look out at our world through eyes than can see as Jesus saw, and hear what Jesus heard, and carry within them the same Spirit that God placed within him. Let us use our bodies to love and to bless, and discover all the gifts that empty hands can hold.

What would it look like if our embodied life experiences became places where God and humankind could meet and Christ be born anew in everyday life.

Emmanuel. God be with us.

Ann Siddall. Ann is a spiritual Director, from South Australia.

I invite you to reflect:

How does this story of Mary and Elizabeth and their babies resonate with you?