

GOD'S AMAZING GIFT

Nicky Ing - 21st December 2003

Micah 5:2-4, Psalm 80:1-7, Hebrews 10:5-10, Luke 1: 39-55.

On this Sunday we continue in the spirit of Advent, the spirit of expectation...waiting for something significant to happen. The readings are so beautiful this morning...the prophet Micah tells us of the care and tenderness of the good shepherd...we have heard these words so often, set to the music of Handel's Messiah...there is joy within us as we consider the love and faithfulness of God....Then the writer of the Hebrews assures us that the old order has passed, that God is not satisfied with burnt or sin offerings, but only with hearts that are obedient to God's will; the passage reminds us that what God did for us happened in the person of the human and crucified Jesus and that his sacrifice continues to sanctify us, to make us holy, throughout the ages in the person of the Son.

I want to focus on the Gospel today because it reflects for us both gentleness and courage in the images which we find there. It also speaks to us of God's amazing gift to us in the coming of Jesus...the gift which we are about to celebrate at this time....

Two women meet on a hill. They are women without any importance in the eyes of the world. Elizabeth, the older one, is the wife of a priest, but she has been unable to conceive a child up till now, a condition which was considered shameful in that place and that time. When we meet Elizabeth, she is pregnant, but at her late age, this is an embarrassment. Mary, the younger woman, is a poor girl from Nazareth, pregnant but not yet married to Joseph....also an embarrassing situation for her in her village. Mary has taken a long journey to come and visit her cousin Elizabeth. The journey from Nazareth to the home of Elizabeth and Zechariah in the hilly country around Jerusalem, where many of the temple priests lived, would take about four days' walking to cover the eighty kilometers....that is a long walk. We might ask why did Mary go there? Traditionally it was thought that Mary went to congratulate Elizabeth on her unexpected pregnancy and to help her as the time for the birth came nearer. But perhaps it is more likely that Mary went to Elizabeth to seek support from another woman, another pregnant woman....someone who would listen to her, and understand her fears. It makes more sense that way....Mary could tell the story of her extraordinary pregnancy, best of all, to another woman who lived some distance away, an older woman, a relative....someone who had also been surprised by joy....surprised by God. So perhaps Mary went to Elizabeth not just to help, but to be helped, not to affirm but to be affirmed, not necessarily to assure but to be assured.

'When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leapt in her womb'...other versions of Scripture read this as 'the child leapt for joy'....there is a powerful recognition by John the Baptist, not yet born, of Jesus.....now, we can sometimes be deaf or blind to God's word, or God's messenger....but anyone who has been a mother, can tell us that it is difficult to be unaware of, or to ignore, a baby kicking in the womb! Elizabeth greets Mary with great joy, and she welcomes her into a space....a space where there is acceptance, where God is named as the one who looks favourably on the poor; God who takes away both the shame of the barren woman and the shame of the vulnerable pregnant girl. The response to Mary's greeting and the blessing that

Elizabeth pronounces makes it clear that the extraordinary events that have occurred are a gift from God; they are a blessing. It is Elizabeth who prepares the way for Mary to speak out the Magnificat...she has helped the younger woman to understand what is happening and assures her that it is of God....the Holy Spirit reveals to Elizabeth that here is something out of the ordinary...and after her inspired greeting, Mary breaks out into a song of praise...of complete trust in God and her faith in God's promise...this song, which is known as the Magnificat, is inspired by the Old Testament song of Hannah, the mother of Samuel. Mary senses that something good and wonderful is happening, not only to her but to other human beings. The humble are being raised...those who feel reverence for God their maker are shown mercy...the powerful are brought down..the lowly are lifted up...and the hungry are fed.....we who hear these words so many years later discover that they make good sense to us too...they remind us of what matters to God, and what God requires of us. Elizabeth and Mary..two pregnant women, expectant in faith, filled with the Spirit, acknowledging God's plan for them and the divine presence in one another. What a wonderful image, isn't it, for the Church, for any Christian community that longs to be the presence of God in the world....a loving, nurturing, affirming presence...These two remarkable women knew that strength and mercy and compassion for the poor sprang from God the creator, a God of good promises. Let us in turn fill this season with compassion....and let us remember that God is not looking for external sacrifices from us, but for obedience. The gift of new life which we receive through Jesus Christ is the greatest gift of all, THE gift which we will celebrate later this week. If we look only to ourselves, or to who we are, or to what we can do, or to what we can get, for our own fulfilment, for hope and for joy, then we are going to be always disappointed...because there really isn't any ultimate, deep, and lasting good news in the world all by itself, or in ourselves alone. It is to all of this that the joy and hope of Mary and Elizabeth speak most loudly...in their recognition of God's promises and faithfulness....so that means, for us too, that we need to trust God in the specific circumstances in which we find ourselves....we need to draw close and learn from these two women, who each carry the word of blessing...we need to join with them in their song today, and hold onto these beautiful words of the Magnificat...because....'Holy is God's Name'....

Amen