

HAPPY CHRISTMAS to you from all at St Peter's Westleton

St Peter's Westleton

And may God bless you richly as we come into a New Year

Micah 5:2-5

'But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, though you are small among the clans of Judah, out of you will come for me one who will be ruler over Israel, whose origins are from of old, from ancient times.'

³Therefore Israel will be abandoned until the time when she who is in labour bears a son, and the rest of his brothers return to join the Israelites.

⁴He will stand and shepherd his flock in the strength of the Lord, in the majesty of the name of the Lord his God. And they will live securely, for then his greatness will reach to the ends of the earth.

⁵And he will be our peace when the Assyrians invade our land and march through our fortresses. We will raise against them seven shepherds, even eight commanders,

Hebrews 10:5-10

Therefore, when Christ came into the world, he said: 'Sacrifice and offering you did not desire, but a body you prepared for me; ⁶with burnt offerings and sin offerings you were not pleased.

⁷Then I said, "Here I am – it is written about me in the scroll – I have come to do your will, my God."'

⁸First he said, 'Sacrifices and offerings, burnt offerings and sin offerings you did not desire, nor were you pleased with them' – though they were offered in accordance with the law. ⁹Then he said, 'Here I am, I have come to do your will.' He sets aside the first to establish the second. ¹⁰And by that will, we have been made holy through the sacrifice of the body of Jesus Christ once for all.

Luke 1:39-55

At that time Mary got ready and hurried to a town in the hill country of Judea, ⁴⁰where she entered Zechariah's home and greeted Elizabeth. ⁴¹When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the baby leaped in her womb, and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. ⁴²In a loud voice she exclaimed: 'Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the child you will bear! ⁴³But why am I so favoured, that the mother of my Lord should come to me? ⁴⁴As soon as the sound of your greeting reached my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy. ⁴⁵Blessed is she who has believed that the Lord would fulfil his promises to her!'

⁴⁶And Mary said: 'My soul glorifies the Lord ⁴⁷and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour,

⁴⁸for he has been mindful of the humble state of his servant. From now on all generations will call me blessed, ⁴⁹for the Mighty One has done great things for me – holy is his name.

⁵⁰His mercy extends to those who fear him, from generation to generation.

⁵¹He has performed mighty deeds with his arm; he has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts.

⁵²He has brought down rulers from their thrones but has lifted up the humble.

⁵³He has filled the hungry with good things but has sent the rich away empty.

⁵⁴He has helped his servant Israel, remembering to be merciful ⁵⁵to Abraham and his descendants for ever, just as he promised our ancestors.'



Where Church & Community
Come Together

Mary

Imagine Mary. She has been visited by an angel, who tells her that she is pregnant, but that her aging relative Elizabeth is, too. But while Elizabeth's pregnancy is special, hers is extra-special. There is the shock of an older woman bearing a baby, but that had been heard of before — it was almost commonplace in the pages of scripture — Sarah, Hannah, Samson's mother. Mary's situation was altogether unique.

It was also dangerous. You will know already that Judaism had strict laws condemning sex out of wedlock, and you will remember that Jesus himself had to stop a crowd stoning a woman caught in adultery. God's blessing on Mary bore great risk — the community of Nazareth might stone her — or stone both her and Joseph together, if they assume they are both lying.

Mary's next actions are quite deliberate. She goes straight down to Judaea to see Elizabeth, her fellow in miraculous circumstances. Luke's description here is a string of 'ands' — she got ready AND went to Judaea AND entered Zechariah's home AND on hearing her greeting the baby leapt in Elizabeth's womb AND Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit AND cried aloud 'blessed are you...' Luke is emphasising the string of connected actions, which are clearly all in God's hands and in God's blessing.

It was very important for Mary to have an older woman to go to who could empathise with her situation and be a confidante and counsellor for her. I have said her situation was dangerous. Zechariah's house was literally a refuge, a safe house for her. If the priest Zechariah and his wife Elizabeth took her in, who was going to argue with them? Zechariah would have been expected to uphold and enforce the law in Deuteronomy. But no, Mary was safe. And there was no point trying to argue with Zechariah — he was struck dumb, remember!

It's a wonderful detail that unborn John the Baptist recognises the presence of the son of God even before anyone else. John's destiny is to be a signpost to the messiah, and he manages to do it even three months before his birth! But it is not just that — he leaps *and* Elizabeth is filled with the Holy Spirit.

There are times when the Holy Spirit puts words in your mouth — if you are willing to risk it and not be quite in control, but trust that God is in control. We have that sense here of Elizabeth gushing with holy delight: 'Blessed are you among women, and blessed the child you shall bear!' She says to Mary 'you're blessed, and I'm blessed by your coming to me!'

And Mary responds with a remarkable response, known very well in the church, especially by those who regularly say evening prayer.

Mary glorifies the Lord, and recognises that her unique situation *is* a blessing. Not only has God blessed her, but he blesses all those who honour him throughout the ages. He is powerful — but how does he use his power? To scatter the proud and bring down the mighty, but then to gather and lift up the poor and the humble. The first song in response to the incarnation is a song about God's interest in equity and justice; his faithfulness and his love. Mary understands exactly who her God is, and what a privilege it is to be chosen. This choice doesn't go to her head — she remains humble, but conscious of the blessing.

Some people would count Mary's situation a mixed blessing: society would treat her with suspicion after this; there was risk of her being stoned; when Jesus was born she would have to flee to Egypt; and she would witness her son's unjust crucifixion. Some blessing! But of course God-given responsibility is a privilege, it is a blessing, and God gives you the strength to bear it and come out still rejoicing when God has really given you the privilege.

Now, Mary's was a unique situation, and much as we have empathised with her predicament, we can't claim to *know* what it was like to carry the incarnate God inside us. On the other hand, in a lesser but still very important way Christians are *all* bearer's of Christ's image, and bearers of the Holy Spirit. The last verse of O Little town of Bethlehem puts it this way: 'O holy child of Bethlehem, descend to us, we pray, cast out our sin and enter in, be born in us today.' We are here because we want Jesus to be alive and active in our lives.

I have four things that I conclude from looking at this story.

Firstly, Mary sought company for comfort and strength — this was not a weakness. We are made to live in relationship with each other. We should really trust and use the support of other Christians, and be the trustworthy, listening support that they need too.

Secondly, Mary's was an extraordinary privilege, even if it was dangerous. Many have borne the privilege of being God's servant fearlessly, though it has cost them reputation, brought them hatred or ridicule and even threatened death. Never doubt the privilege of knowing God's love and God's commission on our lives!

Thirdly, Mary and Elizabeth rejoiced — and we can and should rejoice in the Lord. They are right about God's nature. Never forget this. Bless it and be grateful and praise God. Praising God is a blessing that blesses us.

And lastly, relationship is key. Mary is entrusted with the closest possible relationship with the son of God. But so are we! We are his hands and feet, we are his voice in the world. Don't be still, don't be mute. Be filled with the Spirit, speak and act — in the loving relationship you have with Jesus.

Amen.