

Sermon - Expectant encounter

Based on: Luke 1.39-45

Encountering the Lord

- There are a number of occasions in the Gospel stories where people encounter Jesus unexpectedly.
- The first moment in Jesus' ministry, was after Jesus sent the disciples on ahead of him, across the Sea of Galilee, in the boat:
Early in the morning Jesus came walking towards them on the lake. But when the disciples saw him walking on the lake, they were terrified, saying, 'It is a ghost!' And they cried out in fear. But immediately Jesus spoke to them and said, 'Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid.' (Matthew 14.25-27)
- There are a few moments after his resurrection, when different disciples were obviously not expecting to see him.
- Mary Magdalene encountered him at the tomb:
She turned round and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not know that it was Jesus. Jesus said to her, 'Woman, why are you weeping? For whom are you looking?' Supposing him to be the gardener, she said to him, 'Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away.' Jesus said to her, 'Mary!' She turned and said to him in Hebrew, 'Rabbouni!' (which means [Dear] Teacher). (John 20.14-16)
- Two disciples were walking to Emmaus, and a stranger joined them:
As they came near the village to which they were going, he walked ahead as if he were going on. But they urged him strongly, saying, 'Stay with us, because it is almost evening and the day is now nearly over.' So he went in to stay with them. When he was at the table with them, he took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them. Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized him; and he vanished from their sight. (Luke 24.28-31)
- Some of the disciples returned to being fishermen:
Just after daybreak, Jesus stood on the beach; but the disciples did not know that it was Jesus. Jesus said to them, 'Children, you have no fish, have you?' They answered him, 'No.' He said to them, 'Cast the net to the right side of the boat, and you will find some.' So they cast it, and now they were not able to haul it in because there were so many fish. That disciple whom Jesus loved said to Peter, 'It is the Lord!' (John 21.4-7)
- And then St Paul, when he was still known as Saul, was on his way to Damascus to round up heretical Jews who were claiming that a maverick rabbi called Jesus was, in fact, the Messiah:
Now as he was going along and approaching Damascus, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. He fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, 'Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?' He asked, 'Who are you, Lord?' The reply came, 'I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting.' (Acts 9.3-5)

A shared encounter

- I suggest that today's Gospel story is a foreshadowing of such dramatic revelations, when people suddenly become aware of the Lord's presence - or aware that the person who is present is actually the Lord.
- Two cousins, one relatively old, the other very young - both unexpectedly pregnant - encounter each other when Mary visits Elizabeth.
- Luke describes the meeting as more than just a physical one, but as a spiritual encounter as well.

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- Just as, later, various disciples were to suddenly realise and exclaim, 'It is the Lord!', so both Elizabeth and her unborn son John react.
- Was it the child within responding to his mother's reaction?
- Or was it the mother responding to her unborn baby's reaction?
- Either way, it is described as a shared response, as together there is an expression of joy.
- And who are they responding to?
- To the unborn Jesus, or to Mary, who is carrying him?
- Again, it seems quite natural to assume that it is both Mary *and* the baby within who are causing the response.
- Mary had been overshadowed by the Holy Spirit after responding to her own calling with humble obedience.
- Jesus was quite clearly raised with the same sense of vocation, and obedience, and humility - because he, too, was filled with the Holy Spirit when he responded to his own calling, also with humble obedience.
- And so, in this spiritual encounter, it is Elizabeth, pregnant with John, who responds to Mary, pregnant with Jesus.
- And the moment is blessed, as, inspired by the same Spirit, Elizabeth exclaims the words that then became part of a familiar prayer:
'Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb.' (Luke 1.42)

The Angelus

- The prayer response called the *Angelus* became established during the 11th century in monasteries and convents, eventually becoming associated with the tolling of the 6am, noon, and 6pm bell, to mark the start, middle, and end of each working day.
- It was named the *Angelus* after the opening words of the original Latin: *Angelus Domini nuntiavit Mariæ*
- Many of you will be familiar with the first versicle response, as it reminds us of the angel Gabriel's annunciation to Mary:
The angel of the Lord came to Mary (cf. Luke 1.26,27)
And she conceived by the Holy Spirit. (cf. Luke 1.35)
- The repeated prayer starts with Gabriel's greeting:
Hail Mary, full of grace: the Lord is with you. (Luke 1.28)
- Then continues with Elizabeth's acclamation:
Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb, Jesus. (Luke 1.42)
- And finishes with a personal request to Mary, as our archetypal spiritual mother:
Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners, now and at the hour of our death.
- The second versicle response reminds us of Mary's response to the angel:
Behold the handmaid of the Lord.
Be it unto me according to your word. (Luke 1.38)
- And the third versicle response is from John's prologue:
The Word became flesh,
And dwelt among us. (John 1.14)

Blessed is she who believed

- The whole focus of the prayer of the *Angelus* is that of the incarnation: God taking on human flesh to become tangibly present among us.

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- And God achieves this through Mary, who responds to the divine call to participate in God's action.
- Elizabeth explains why Mary is to be honoured, when she says:
'And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfilment of what was spoken to her by the Lord.' (Luke 1.45)
- Such is Mary's faith relationship with God that she believes in what has been communicated to her in the angelic visitation.
- Indeed - such is Mary's faith relationship with God that she is able to be open to receiving such a communication in the first place.
- What Gabriel communicates to Mary is not only that she herself would conceive through God's life-giving Spirit, but also that her cousin Elizabeth, although understood to be past her child-bearing years, was also pregnant.
- Mary's faith enables her to believe both the angel's message for herself, and for her cousin.
- And so she takes a journey to a *Judean town in the hill country, where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth.* (Luke 1.39-40)
- And Elizabeth is able to confirm the angel's message concerning herself, acclaim Mary's place in God's plan, and pronounce a blessing on Mary for her deep faith.

The example of Mary, and Elizabeth

- As we near the end of the Advent season, and our personal time of preparation for celebrating once again the feast of the Incarnation, when we remember and give thanks for God becoming present among us -
- as we move into the last few days of Advent, how might the gospel story speak to us at this time?
- Mary's faith, and her own time of waiting expectantly for her child to be born, can be an inspiration for faithful, expectant waiting.
- It is also relevant to be reminded of Mary's humility, and her obedient heart.
- Not a mindless obedience, but a mindful one: a participatory obedience, that comprehends enough to recognise the responsibility, and trusts enough to accept what she does not yet understand.
- Can the same be said for each of us, in terms of our own faith relationship with God?
- Are each of us participating with God with humble, obedient hearts, in enacting his will and purpose in our lives?

- Alternatively, we might need to be reminded of Elizabeth, and of her responses to Mary, pregnant with God's son.
- Like Elizabeth, are we ready to acclaim what God brought about through the mother of Jesus?
- And do we also recognise and acclaim what God brings about through others today?
- Like Elizabeth, do we acknowledge Mary's faith - and do we likewise acknowledge the faith of others today?
- Like Elizabeth, do we participate in blessing Mary for her faith - and do we also pronounce God's blessing on those who fulfil God's calling in their lives today?

- The story of Mary's visitation to Elizabeth is a delightful story of two cousins, sharing some of their time of being pregnant together, and sharing their faith together.
- But they are also models of faithful people, who are a source of inspiration for our own faith - especially as we wait and prepare to celebrate once more Emmanuel - God with us.