

**ANGLICAN CHAPLAINCY OF ALL SAINTS' MARSEILLE**  
**WITH AIX-EN-PROVENCE AND THE LUBERON**

**Reflection – 4<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Advent – 19<sup>th</sup> December 2021**

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Today's reading from Luke comes just after the visit by the angel Gabriel to Mary, telling her she will bear a child who will be the greatest person ever known on earth. She accepts the news, obedient to God's will, and just asks for a few details. We don't hear of any refusal or scepticism, nor argument from Mary. Then Luke goes on to say that a few days after this amazing occurrence, Mary travels to the hill country of Judea to visit an older relative, Elizabeth. She's welcomed with open arms, and Elizabeth is filled with Holy Spirit, blesses Mary, and the baby she is carrying leaps for joy in her womb.

It's a lovely passage, all happiness and excitement from the two women, one little more than a girl, the other much older and up to now, infertile.

But every coin has two sides, and so do most situations that people find themselves in. Much depends on how we react and how much we trust God to make things right. Elizabeth's husband Zechariah who was a priest, who could be expected to know his scripture inside out, didn't believe that his old wife could ever conceive, and as a result was struck dumb until the child had safely arrived.

Nowadays in the western world, the stigma of not being able to have a child has by and large gone. Women aren't looked down on by society if they are childless, it's seen a private sorrow or a life choice. Technology and science have moved on so that women who years ago wouldn't have been able to have a child, can now have treatment and have a child even in their 50s. But in the time of Elizabeth and Mary, Elizabeth would have spent her whole adult life as someone perceived as useless, of no worth, because she couldn't bear children. Of course no-one in those days thought it might be her husband Zechariah who might be infertile! It was seen as the only purpose of women and if you couldn't bear a child then you were very

much ignored, looked down upon, and rejected. No doubt Elizabeth had had her fair share of abuse and name calling in her village.

Equally the stigma of having a child outside of marriage has gone in our western society. Often, we see couples getting married after they've had their family, their children proudly trotting down the aisle as flower girls or pages boys. We have a lot of one parent families, and it is accepted that women can have children and bring them up alone. Not so in Mary's time – for her to become pregnant without the participation of her fiancé Joseph would have been a shameful thing to do. Her whole family would suffer the consequences – she would have been seen as bringing disgrace on them too, and on her husband to be. Some families would have thrown her out onto the street.

But we don't see any of this other side of the coin in the gospel. It's very much a cup half full, not a cup half empty.

However, it's interesting that we don't hear of Mary's family's reaction to her becoming pregnant. Why did she make that long and dangerous journey, 80 to 100 miles away, to see an older relative? Was it because the news hadn't gone down well at home, so she sought out someone who knew all about social stigma and was also going through a miraculous pregnancy? She was only a young girl. Had she not thought about the consequences in the excitement of being told by an angel that she was going to be the most honoured of all women, that she was going to be a mother, and the mother of the greatest King in the world? It's heady stuff for someone barely out of childhood. But if her family didn't believe a word of it, her life was going to be very difficult. Perhaps she needed to be with someone who would believe her, who would support her and help her.

And Elizabeth doesn't let her down. She welcomes Mary with open arms, without hesitation. Finally, she herself is no longer ostracised or shamed, and she shares that with Mary. She doesn't turn her away in case she brings shame on her again, she doesn't think about what the neighbours will say. No, she welcomes her in, blesses and celebrates her, and believes wholeheartedly that Mary really is blessed by God above all women and so is her unborn child. She says "Why am I so honoured, that the mother of my Lord should visit me?" She understands that this is a holy child and when her unborn baby leaps for joy it paves the way for the

extraordinary things that her own child will do and become. In Elizabeth's eyes, the pregnancy that could have shamed Mary instead brings her joy and honour.

We see here a glimpse of how Jesus will treat sinners and prostitutes – the same inclusive love that Elizabeth shows this girl. She sees God at work in those whom society excludes and mistreats.

It makes me think: how would I have reacted in such circumstances? How do I react now to those who are in difficulty? Do I judge rather than make welcome people in need? We still see in our society today people on the margins, ignored or thrown out. This Christmas there will be many young and old living rough on the streets in our cities, refuges will be full, refugees will still be desperately trying to get somewhere safe, people will be bullied because of their colour, gender, lifestyle, religion, or whatever makes them different.

I can't put it better than the American priest Judith Jones who wrote "Elizabeth's words and actions invite us to reflect on our own openness to the ways that God chooses to act in our world. What is God doing through unexpected people in our society today? Where is God at work through people whom our neighbours and fellow church members often exclude or treat as shameful? Will we listen to the Spirit's prompting when the bearers of God's new reality show up on our doorstep?"

May we, like Elizabeth and Mary, trust that God is coming to save and free us. May we, like them, give thanks that God has taken away our shame and then respond to God's love by welcoming the shameful. May we, like them, become a community that supports each other as we hope and wait."

Amen.