

Sunday 24th December 2017

Service of Communion at 9:30 am St Nicholas

God's Final Preparation for Christmas

**Let the words of my mouth, and the meditation of my heart, be acceptable
in thy sight, O LORD, my strength, and my redeemer.** *Psalm 19:14*

The story we have just heard from Luke 1 is about a very young girl, probably in her early teens, and a woman, her cousin, whom some had thought to be past child bearing age - in those days that probably meant that she was in her mid to late twenties and had been married over ten years.

The most striking thing about the story is the wonderfully calm and faithful way each young woman accepted her role in this gentle sounding story but which is another fantastical part of God's amazing plan.

As we come to the eve of Christmas and begin think about the Christmas celebration it is tempting to think of this story as the beginning of God's rescue, but instead we should recognise that it is the next great step, foretold many times in the Hebrew scriptures.

God's plan for his world had always been understood by those who studied the Hebrew Scripture. In the Old Testament there are hundreds of specific prophecies detailing the coming of the Rescuer. There are prophecies detailing the virgin birth, his birth in Bethlehem, his lineage from King David within the tribe of Judah, his being called the son of God, his sinless life, and finally his atonement for the sins of all his people through his suffering and his death and his resurrection.

What is so wonderful about the Christmas story? God shows again and again his great love for us and reclaims us for his own.

There are several ideas we may take from this story but I wish to look at and comment on three. The first is:

1 Faith: The great faith of both women in accepting their role in God's plan

Mary and Elizabeth shared a dream, as did many Jews at that time. It was the ancient dream of Israel and Judea that one day everything that the scriptures had prophesied would come true; all nations, not just the Jews but Gentiles too, would be blessed through Abraham's family. Mary and Elizabeth knew the scriptures, the psalms and the prophecies which spoke always of mercy and hope, of victory over evil, of God's rescue of the people of the world. They knew the scriptures which spoke of the coming of a rescuer, a Messiah.

Elizabeth has been barren for many years, and had probably long ago passed from despair into despondency. However, in the previous part of this chapter we read that when she learns that she will be the mother of John, she immediately rejoices and accepts that role even though she must long have believed that she was unlikely to become a mother. She says '***The Lord has done this for me, in these days he has shown his favour and taken away my disgrace among the people.***'

Mary is told by an angel that she is about to become the mother of a child, the Messiah. Becoming a mother before wedlock at that time would often be a disaster, becoming the mother of the longed for saviour must have been an astounding thought. The message the angel delivers is enormous and for ever life changing, yet, with very little questioning, and this for clarification only, Mary accepts the role God gives her - quietly, without any fuss, with thanks and in humility. Mary says in response: "***Here I am, the Lord's servant; let it be as you have said.***"

Both women received messages that would transform their lives yet each accepted their calling meekly and without hesitation. They had great faith in God and the way in which he works. Their faith is exemplary.

2 The Magnificat

And Mary then sings her wonderful song, we call it the Magnificat. This piece was one of the first I ever sang as a chorister back in 1951. I always remember it in the setting by Walmisley we sang that first time. "My soul doth magnify the Lord, and my spirit hath rejoiced in God my Saviour....." I have always had a great fondness for it and learned the words when I was young. My understanding and appreciation of its teaching has grown over all these intervening years.

The song focuses on God's great works, especially his tendency to turn everything upside down. Bishop Tom Wright calls it the Gospel before the Gospel. This song is all about God but it is also all about revolution.

The Magnificat is full of biblical quotations. All Jewish children would have known these quotations from childhood. Many of the ideas of the song are taken from the prayer of Hannah, the mother of Samuel, in 1 Samuel 2, when, after many years of being childless, she is told she will be blessed with a baby - a story similar to that of Elizabeth's.

Mary sings that God "has been mindful of the humble state of his servant" when choosing a mother for the Messiah, when he might have selected a woman of great prominence. From now she will be eternally known and blessed for the Lord has done great things for her. (1:48).

The Lord "has scattered those who are proud in their innermost thoughts" rather than honouring them (1:51).

"He has brought down rulers from their thrones, and exalted the humble. He has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away with empty hands" (1:52-53).

In these latter verses we see how God is able to turn what we may think of as the natural order of things upside down. It is a topsy-turvy world as Mary herself can testify as a very lowly maiden now asked to fill this hugely important role.

As we examine the Magnificat perhaps we should consider once more what it means for each of us.

For we ourselves can often be proud, we can sometimes be haughty, we can regularly lack humility. In comparison with most people in the world, and most people throughout history, we are wealthy and most of us have never known real hunger

Mary's song challenges us to consider our values and goals. We should be encouraged to step back and think about our values and what we are seeking.

Are we looking for the wrong things in life? Are our lives more devoted to seeking security, or reputation, or power, or all three instead of seeking the Lord and to do his will? Do we hold on to material blessings, or do we share them with others, particularly the poor and hungry?

The "Magnificat" should remind us of the need to devote our lives to being willing and humble servants of God; we are called to be God's servants in the world; we should be serving others; we should live today for what really matters, we should invite and allow God to use us. God has blessed us with many gifts; let's use those gifts in his service.

As Advent ends and Christmas comes we should rededicate ourselves to finding a way to accept Jesus fully into our lives, to sacrifice our own wills to him, to serve him and his purpose wholeheartedly, and to help God accomplish his amazing plan.

3 So what about God's amazing plan

Earlier in the year we spent many weeks reading and studying the Acts of the Apostles, and privately I have spent the last several months considering as a whole the two parts of the story written by the same author, the Gospel of Luke and Acts.

One of the features of Acts is the number of times St Paul is found in a new location, sometimes in front of a Roman governor, sometimes going into the synagogue, sometimes in the streets or near the water source, but he is always telling, as did St Peter before him, about the ways in which Jesus' ministry, his suffering, death and resurrection were predicted in the Jewish scriptures, how everything lead up to Jesus earthly ministry, sacrifice and resurrection and how it is all part of God's amazing plan. He invites all Jews, and all Gentiles, to make the same leap of understanding.

Paul points out to everyone that it was always promised through God's revelations to the Jewish nation, that the whole world, Jews and Gentiles, God-fearing people and pagans alike, would be blessed and redeemed by the Messiah. He always emphasizes that he, always a faithful Jew and a prominent leader of the Pharisees, had never changed faith at all, but now recognised clearly that Jesus' ministry is the next stage in God's amazing plan.

When Paul was speaking he would surely explain how God's plan and the need for it was displayed throughout all the stories in the Old Testament; the Fall from the Garden of Eden; the rescue of Noah in the flood; God's promises to Abraham, and Abraham's faith; the promises fulfilled in the patriarchs; the enslaving of the Jewish people in Egypt and the great Exodus through the desert under Moses and entry into the promised land under Joshua; the great Kings David and Solomon with all their faults, and the building of the Temple; the later

exile in Babylon and the return to build the second temple ordained by Cyrus. God's hand was, and is, evident in everything.

And Paul would no doubt go through all the quotations we know from the Old Testament about the coming of the Messiah. Here are some of them - all of them would have been known intimately by his Jewish listeners:

Everything was predicted, often several times. Jesus' birth was predicted in Isaiah 7:14: "*Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign: The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel.*" Jesus' importance was shown in Isaiah 9:6: "*For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.*" And his birthplace and his existence from the beginning of time in Micah 5:2: "*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.*"

Jesus' entry into Jerusalem was foreseen in Zechariah 9:9: "*Rejoice greatly, O Daughter of Zion! Shout, Daughter of Jerusalem! See, your king comes to you, righteous and having salvation, gentle and riding on a donkey,*" And his horrific death in Psalm 22:16-18: "*they have pierced my hands and my feet. I can count all my bones. They divide my garments among them and cast lots for my clothing.*"

The clearest prophecy about Jesus is the entire 53rd chapter of Isaiah. Isaiah 53:3-7 is especially unmistakable, and you will surely recall these words: "*He was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows, and familiar with suffering.he was despised. Surely he took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows,..... he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed. We all, like sheep, have gone astray, and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all.*

Tonight when we come for the midnight service of communion we will hear again that remarkable reading of the Gospel from John 1 (and this is the King James' version): *In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things were made through Him, and without Him nothing was made that was made. In Him was life, and the life was the light of men. And the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not comprehend it.*

This tells us that God the Creator knew from the beginning that the world and the people in it could never be as perfect as he. He would need to come to earth in the person of the Word, Jesus, as a redeemer and as a sacrifice for our sinfulness.

By this we need to remember that there is a larger story within which every single Christian story - every story of individual conversion, faith, spiritual life, obedience and hope - is set. Only by understanding and celebrating the larger story can we hope to understand everything that's going on in our own smaller stories, and so observe God at work in and through our own lives. (*para T Wright*)

On the eve of the day when we celebrate Christmas, the next great step in the fulfilment of God's promises, promises which are always kept, let us remember everything that God promised, that this child would be the Messiah, and, not only would he come to make this momentous sacrifice 2,000 years ago, he would also come again, a second coming and in Glory.

As we await Christ's second coming let us rejoice and give thanks for all God's love, for all his mercies, all his precious gifts, and above all for the great sacrifice of his son.

Let us remember, too, that we have a duty to perform. Yes to praise him, yes, to love him, yes to spread this great news throughout all the world, but yes too to fulfil his special call which he makes on each one of us to serve him and to play the part reserved for us in bringing about the coming of his kingdom here on earth. Our part in God's plan may not be as spectacular as that played by Mary and her cousin Elizabeth, but every part, even that played by each of us, is important.

And let us remember that when called we should respond with great faith, as did Mary. “*Here I am, the Lord’s servant; let it be as you have said.*”

Let us pray

Be a bright flame before me, O God,
a guiding star above me.

Be a smooth path below me,
a kindly shepherd behind me,
today, tonight, and for ever.

St. Columba