



Weekly Worship Resource for Gladsmuir and Longniddry

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Today's readings

Luke 1: 26–45 (“The Birth of Jesus Foretold”)

In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. And he came to her and said, 'Greetings, favoured one! The Lord is with you.' But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. The angel said to her, 'Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favour with God. And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. He will reign over the house of Jacob for ever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.' Mary said to the angel, 'How can this be, since I am a virgin?' The angel said to her, 'The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God. And now, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son; and this is the sixth month for her who was said to be barren. For nothing will be impossible with God.' Then Mary said, 'Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.' Then the angel departed from her.

In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country, where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leapt in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit and exclaimed with a loud cry, 'Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me? For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leapt for joy. And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfilment of what was spoken to her by the Lord.' Amen. (NRSV)

Today's hymns

- 1 *Guide me, O thou great Jehovah* (CH167)
- 2 *God is our refuge and our strength* (CH36(1))
- 3 *Give thanks for life, the measure of our days* (CH736)
- 4 *Great God, your love has called us here* (CH484)
- 5 *Jesus shall reign where'er the sun* (CH470)

In the Name of the Father and of

If you work your way through any given year, you will find all sorts of days that have special significance to the Church: Advent Sunday, Christmas Day, Easter, Harvest, Remembrance and so on. Most of these high days and holidays are familiar to us, but occasionally, as with last Monday, a special day descends upon us unexpectedly and we are caught unawares.

Have you ever heard of the Feast of the Visitation? This comes around every 31st day of May and it is the point in the year at which we pause to reflect on today's passage from the gospel of Luke in which Mary the expectant mother of Jesus calls in on her cousin Elizabeth with some remarkable news.

We sometimes hear this story in Nine Lessons and Carols services just before Christmas, and it seems to be suitably well placed for the time of year, just a few days prior to the celebration of Jesus' arrival in a Bethlehem manger. But surely that winter timing's not quite right from a biological perspective. Rather, the *springtime* is the more fitting part of the year for us to be brought face to face with Mary and Elizabeth, at a point when not one but two pregnancies are there to be considered – pregnancies which will result in the arrival of two key figures of the faith: first John, then his second cousin, Jesus.

What is so attractive about this story is the sharing of news between two excited mothers to be. And I'm sure anyone soon to be a first-time parent can tell of the excitement of sharing news with family or friends. When we were expecting our first baby, Ailsa called a friend and passed on the glad tidings to her, only to be told that she too was expecting at exactly the same point in the calendar. Our daughters grew up just 17 days apart, good friends throughout childhood. Perhaps you can think of similar stories that evoke a sense of thrilled excitement, whether from your own experience or from that of a loved one. The fact is that sharing news as good as that is a great delight and a tremendous joy for all concerned.

Here, right at the start of Luke's gospel, we find two women of different ages but of the same family, drawn together by the common bond of impending motherhood: two women who could understand a little of what the other was going through. In particular, in Elizabeth we see a person of faith, who delights in her visitor and who sees the true significance of Mary's good news. Listen to Elizabeth's response of joy to her cousin: *"Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me? For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leapt for joy."*

Elizabeth understands that she and her cousin are on a great adventure. Each would have a baby boy, and each child would grow up to make an enormous impact upon their world. More than this, each man would stay faithful right through to their deaths, being killed in great cruelty and injustice. But for now the executioner's blade and the Empire's Cross are still a long way off. For now it is enough for Elizabeth and Mary to wonder at news so good that it causes the older woman's baby to leap in her womb.

A word which so far we have mentioned more than once in this sermon is "joy", and this word seems to permeate much of the first couple of chapters of Luke's gospel. When the angel Gabriel comes to tell Mary that she will be the mother of God's chosen one, he greets the young girl in a very positive way, by saying: "Do not be afraid." For her part, Mary's response is just as positive:

"Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word."

the Son and of the Holy Spirit . . .

We have already heard how gladly old cousin Elizabeth learns of Mary's pregnancy, with the joy spreading even to unborn baby John who kicks in the womb with all his might.

Later the joy spreads yet further: we read Mary's song of praise, the "Magnificat", in which she thanks God for his goodness in bringing to fruition the promise of the Hebrew prophets from across the generations:

"My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour, for he has looked with favour on the lowliness of his servant.

Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed; for the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name."

Luke is absolutely up-front about the news of the coming Messiah. This news is Good News, as heralded by angel and archangel, by an aged woman and her unborn child, by a young girl astonished by the part she would play in the outworking of salvation.

At a time like our current time of pandemic, we all need to remember that the news from heaven to earth is not just any old news. It is much-needed, much-craved Good News for humanity, covering people of every tribe, every race, every creed, whether Jew or gentile, rich or poor, slave or free, female or male. This news from heaven declares that God is with us in a birth like no other. Through all the ups and all the downs, God is with us. In the midst of great celebration and deepest mourning, God is with us. No matter what trouble might come our way, God is before us ... behind us ... *with us.*

No doubt Elizabeth and Mary would have many worries in the years to come, with John going off into the wilderness to live a life of poverty and prophecy, while Jesus hits the road with a strange bunch of friends. But the boys' mothers would always have that special memory of a day when – together – their joy was overflowing: a memory which must have helped them keep the faith through all the storms and tornadoes of life. In Elizabeth and Mary we see a deep, in-dwelling, incontestable assurance that their boys were on a path of holy purpose like no other. And I suspect that this assurance must have been what kept them going, even in the roughest and most tragic of circumstances.

Luke tells us that Mary stayed with Elizabeth for a full three months. Given that we are also told that she arrived some six months into her cousin's pregnancy, this probably means that Mary was around until at least close to the delivery of little baby John. That's a long time for the cousins to have been in each other's company. Did it give them the chance to dwell on the amazing promises they had heard from heaven? Might they have reflected together on the common (uncommon!) mystery which was being played out in each of their lives? Perhaps they chatted about what other people would make of their tall tale of these two infants, one the "prophet of the Most High", the other the "Son of the Most High".

Elizabeth gave Mary more than just lodgings. And Mary gave Elizabeth more than just a nice visit from a young relative. The great Dutch priest and writer, Henri Nouwen, puts it beautifully when he says this about their precious time living together:

"Neither Mary nor Elizabeth had to wait in isolation. They could wait together and thus deepen in each other their faith in God, for whom nothing is impossible. Thus, God's most radical intervention into history was listened to and received in community. How can I ever let God's grace fully work in my life unless I can live in a community of people who can affirm it, deepen it and strengthen it? God ... wants us to form new friendships and a new community—holy places where his grace can grow in fullness and bear fruit." Amen.

Praying for others

God our loving heavenly Father,
we pray for all who are sad, in trouble and weary this day:
those known to us, and those known only to you.
May your Spirit of peace, love, and contentment
dwell with them and with each of us this day.

May we experience something of the mystery of your infinite love for creation,
and learn to trust that whatever may come along, ultimately “all will be well”.

Mysterious God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit,
whose very being is held in the community of three in one,
enliven us this day, and fill us as you did Elizabeth and Mary
with a pregnant joyful expectation for better things to come.

Inspire us as your people, to strive to build your kingdom and community of love
here where we are, to spread the Gospel of joy
not just with words but with deeds.

Help us to encourage each other and build up your church
as a community of care and inclusion,
so the creation you love can once again leap for joy and your Kingdom come.

These things we pray in the name of God,
Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

And finally . . .

Abigail Morrison considers vaccine availability:

Our way out of this pandemic is clear: vaccines, vaccines and vaccines. Lockdowns can only ever be a short term and temporary measure because their long-term consequences are so dreadful: economic downturn leading to poverty, ill health and early death; and poor mental and physical health now.

In the UK we are progressing well with our vaccine programme. Nearly three quarters of the adult population have had their first jab and nearly half have had both doses. There are clear signs this is breaking the link between infection and serious illness and death. This is very, very good news.

But, as has been said before, no-one is safe until we are all safe. Whilst the Covid-19 virus circulates widely in parts of the world it means a much greater chance of vaccine-resistant variants of the virus getting a foothold. And, of course, it means many more people – often the poorest and most vulnerable – will become seriously ill with Covid-19 and many will die. It would be good to see greater urgency and faster progress on getting vaccine doses to the poorer countries in the world.

Britain has done well in securing millions of doses of various vaccines – far more than we will need. I for one would like to see more of our excess vaccine supplies going to others who need them but can't afford them. Not only is it the right way to care for our neighbours far away but it helps us in the long term too. It's a win-win.

Let us think less of helping only ourselves and more of helping everyone to get through this pandemic safely.