

Lord, as we realise how much Elizabeth and Mary believed your word, open our ears, and eyes and minds this morning, we pray, and help us to trust you too. Amen.

Elizabeth (Gen. 25.20-26; Lk 1.39-45)

I imagine most of you know what a **baby shower** is. Am I right? I must admit that until fairly recently I thought it was an environmentally friendly alternative to a baby bath,



or something like this used in a developing country where every drop of water counts. My excuse for this former ignorance is that these social gatherings hadn't been invented when our children were born.

I've never organised one, but I'm told that **baby showers**, with all their present giving, usually take place sometime after the sixth month of pregnancy, the stage Elizabeth was at when the angel told Mary about her relative's condition: *"Even Elizabeth your relative is going to have a child in her old age, and she who is unable to conceive is in her sixth month. For no word from God will ever fail"* (Luke 1.37).

But it was **no baby shower** occasion when these two mums-to-be met up to celebrate. No high-profile event advertised well in advance on social media and certainly no online gift list at a major store. Today we are celebrating the **aged Elizabeth, pregnant at last** after so many years of longing, and the **pregnant peasant girl Mary**.

Elizabeth and Zechariah lived up to their **priestly heritage** as descendants of Aaron: *"And they were both righteous before God, walking in all the commandments and ordinances of the Lord blameless"* (Luke 1:6). And yet, there was an **element of sadness** to their lives; for the very next verse tells us, *"But they had no child, because Elizabeth was barren, and they were both well advanced in years"* (v. 7).

We heard last week about Zechariah being struck dumb in the temple for unbelief. **Think about this from Elizabeth's perspective.** Her husband comes home from work unable to speak. He makes signs, writes words on a tablet (the wax and wood variety) but remains silent. Then, to her great joy, she discovers that she is pregnant.

Months pass, and one day there is a **knock at the door**. It's Mary, a relative (Luke doesn't say cousin). The visit would have been a complete surprise to Elizabeth. Not the done thing in our world where everything is carefully planned as an election campaign. We want to know **who is coming for Christmas**, don't we? When will they arrive? And perhaps more important, when will they go home?

The ancient world was very different. It was full of surprises – no smartphones, texts, or emails to make our endless arrangements. **People just showed up.** That's exactly what happened here: *"Mary arose and went with haste into the hill country, to a town in Judah, and she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth"* (Luke 1:39f).

Mary, in response to Gabriel's prompting, *didn't waste a minute!* (as *The Message* puts it) and travelled the 80-100 miles in about four days. No dash down the motorway, but walking the **length of the Dales Way**. Have you thought of it that way, Mike?

Mary went to see the "lesser" miracle of Elizabeth's pregnancy and had a confirmation of the "greater" miracle of conception of the Son of God in her own womb! When she got there, **the very child in Elizabeth's womb confirmed it!**

Mary had either just conceived or was about to, and we are told (v.56) that she *stayed with Elizabeth for about three months* (presumably until around the time John was born) *and then returned home*. **What would we think** these days if a relative just turned up and then stayed three months?

Let's consider the **context of this "undercover" meeting**. Both women are poor – one is unmarried, one has a husband who can't speak. Both women, and the children they carry, are seriously at risk in their society. Mary could have been stoned to death for adultery (even when betrothed) and Elizabeth could have been divorced for not giving Zechariah a son and heir. Without male support, Elizabeth could have starved to death! **But both have joy!**

Both women have **an extraordinary story to share**. After all these years Elizabeth was expecting a child. When she said, *"Thus the Lord has dealt with me, in the days when He looked upon me, to take away my reproach among people"* (Luke 1:25), she was **rejoicing** in more than just the fact that she was having a baby. She was rejoicing that after living with the sorrow of barrenness right into her old age, it turned out that God had bigger plans for her than anyone could have imagined.

Eastern greetings were lengthy and, as Mary's began, *unborn baby John leapt in Elizabeth's womb* (vv. 41,44). This was **no ordinary kick** to be expected at six months. Elizabeth understood it as **her baby hailing Mary's even more special son**. *"Why am I so favoured, that the mother of my Lord should come to me?"* (v.43). How she knew that Mary was expecting and that the baby would be her *"Lord"* (v.43) remains a mystery. Luke's explanation is that ***Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit*** (v.41).

Some commentators think that Luke could be envisaging the divine conception as **taking place at this very moment** of double blessing from Elizabeth. Elizabeth hails Mary as the woman to thank God for – for her belief in God's message (*"Blessed is she who has believed that the Lord would fulfil his promises to her!"*, v.45) but especially for the child she bears (*"Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the child you will bear!"*, v.42). Notice how **Elizabeth blessed Mary twice**. This Spirit-inspired double blessing released Mary's famous outpouring of praise, the Magnificat (vv.46-55)

Elizabeth was faithful to what God had told them. She and Zechariah were **committed to name the child John** as the angel had said! When she was pressurised to name the eight-day-old baby after his father, she refused to do so — keeping true instead to God's instructions, as confirmed by Zechariah on a writing tablet just before he got his voice back (vv. 59-64).

There are two reasons for my **somewhat unusual choice of OT reading**. It wasn't because both passages refer to movement in the womb, or that we had twins who *jostled each other* (Gn 25.22) like Esau and Jacob.

Firstly, *Isaac also prayed to the Lord on behalf of his wife, because she was childless. The Lord answered his prayer, and his wife Rebekah became pregnant* (Gn 25.21). In

just the same way, the angel told Zechariah: *“Do not be afraid; your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you are to call him John”* (Lk 1.13).

Secondly, when Rebekah asked *“Why is this happening to me?”* (Gn 25.22) she was told *“Two nations are in your womb ... and **the elder will serve the younger**”* (Gn 25.23). Our twins were born only **four minutes apart** (anxious ones, as I wondered whether I was going to be living in an all-female household!), we aren't told **how long Jacob spent grasping Esau's heel** (Gn 25.26) before joining elder brother in the big wide world, but we do know that **John the Baptist was about six months older than Jesus** and that he spent his life serving his younger relative.

- Notice Elizabeth's humility about this, just like Mary's *“I am the Lord's servant”* (v.38). Her special son will be surpassed by her young relative's new babe, yet Mary's visit is seen as a huge honour for her (v.43). **Do we rejoice in the success of others who put us in the shade?**
- Notice that Elizabeth confesses Jesus as her Lord in v.43. Thomas confessed Jesus as *“My Lord and my God”* after the resurrection (John 20:28). But Elizabeth calls Jesus her Lord before he is even born! **Can you stand with Elizabeth as she calls Jesus “my Lord”?**
- If we can, **we can share in Elizabeth's joy**, just like *the neighbours and relatives who heard that the Lord had shown her great mercy, and shared her joy* (v.58). Joy lead to praise when Zechariah's *tongue was set free, and he began to speak, praising God* (v.64). This is the joy of those who say to Jesus, *“You are my Lord.”* And this joy can be yours and mine! **Are you singing for joy** at Jesus' coming this Christmas, or have you heard too many supermarket carols already?

A **MAF pilot in Suriname** was asked to name a baby girl born at 200 feet just after the emergency flight to hospital took off. At first the pilot was speechless (like Zechariah) but then he chose the name Elizabeth and prayed that *“the child would grow up to be like the descendant of Aaron, wife of Zechariah, mother of John the Baptist and relative of Mary”* because Elizabeth means **God has sworn a binding promise**.

As we think of babies and young people in our families and friendship groups this Christmas, let us think not just of material gifts, but pray (like godparents at a baptism) that they may be gifted not a baby shower, **but a real downpour of divine promises**.

And while we are at it, we are all children of God so **let's claim not just a sprinkling,**



nor even a shower, but a deluge of promises for ourselves, because (as the angel told Mary) *no word from God will ever fail*" (v.37). She, like Zechariah and Elizabeth, and Isaac and Rebekah before them, would know that in all the turmoil of life the mercy of God is to be trusted.

When did you last exult in God for keeping his promises? This is the resurrection experience. It's knowing Emmanuel - God with us.

Lord, we can learn so much from the humility and joyful obedience of Elizabeth and her kinswoman Mary. Help us, we pray, to claim the deluge of promises you have offered us, this Christmas and always. Amen.