

## Advent 4

A sermon preached by the Rector, the Very Reverend Tim Barker, at the parish church of St Andrew Guernsey on Sunday 19 December 2021

*Readings: Micah 5 vv 2-5a and Luke 1 vv 39-55*

This is one of the times of the year when I wonder how important it is to be honest. People kindly say, 'Oh, it's your busy time.' Sometimes, I explain that, because I am Dean as well as being Rector of St Andrew, I'm not so busy as some of my colleagues, because much of the 'being Dean' side of my work disappears until the beginning of January. But, frankly, sometimes it's just easier to smile and say, 'Yes'.

It would be easier to answer a different question. 'Are you ready for Christmas?' To which the answer is, 'No. But it's coming anyway, so let's all be joyful!'

In today's readings we are taken to a very different space from preparation, to ancient prophecy in Micah, and the story of Mary visiting Elizabeth in the gospel of St Luke.

Micah was an eighth-century prophet. His prophecies are primarily designed to call the Kingdom of Judah back to its common core values of righteousness and justice, especially for the poor. This passage today should not be understood in any other context. It is not to be viewed as a prediction of the birth of Jesus, though Christians often interpret it that way. It is rather a vision of restoration, of righteousness with kingship that cares for the lost values of a nation.

While the image 'she who is in labour has brought forth' is often assumed to be looking forward to Mary, Micah is concerned about political history and its future, and how God will deliver God's people, but he is not necessarily looking forward to a Messiah in the way many have chosen to interpret his prophecy.

The significant message of Micah is that in the midst of turmoil and in a nation that has lost its bearings, God's plan will continue to be revealed and it will involve leadership that brings in a reign of peace. This is a message of hope we badly need to hear in our time.

In the warmth of late May, which seems like a distant dream in the cold and dark of late December, the Church keeps the feast of the Visitation of the Blessed Virgin Mary. The gospel reading on that occasion is the one we just heard, the story of pregnant Mary's visit to her elderly relative Elizabeth, who is herself pregnant with John the Baptist.

Now, at this time of year when the days are shortest and the nights are longest, we hear that visitation story again on the final Sunday of Advent, in preparation for Christmas.

What happens? Young Mary, a young girl, has heard the angel's remarkable message that she is to be the mother of the Messiah. In an exercise of the bravest faith, she agrees, although this pregnancy seems to promise the end of her engagement to Joseph. She agrees to this remarkable and, in the eyes of many, scandalous motherhood.

A little later, she travels to Elizabeth's home, in the hill country. Pregnant women in Mary's time and place did not travel; they stayed at home. But Mary gets up and goes.

Why does she go? To find refuge with an understanding relative against criticisms thrown against her because of the scandalous circumstances around her pregnancy? We do not know. But the meeting of these two pregnant women is full of surprises.

It is common for babies to move in the womb in ways their mothers can feel. Sometimes these movements are called kicks. But John in his mother's womb did much more. He jumped for joy! When Mary called out upon her arrival, John jumped in the womb of old Elizabeth. How startled his mother must have been!

The Holy Spirit then filled Elizabeth, and she cried out to her visitor, 'Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb.'

Here we have the older woman offering extravagant honour to the younger one, a teenager mysteriously pregnant. Yes, the world is turning upside down! The old era, which Elizabeth represents, has not much time left. The new era, ushered in by Mary, is about to dawn.

'Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb.' Elizabeth is the first to utter this acclamation, which becomes a favourite Christian devotion down through the centuries.

She then says more. She asks:

'Why has it happened that my Lord's mother has come to visit me? As soon as I heard your greeting, the baby inside me jumped for joy! You are blessed, Mary, because of the child you carry. You are blessed, Mary, for believing that what the Lord told you would come true.'

Here the older woman does not bless the younger, but recognises that the younger woman is already wonderfully blessed. Yet we who know what will follow are aware that this blessing is not all springtime. It will have its winter season. A sword of anguish will pierce the heart of blessed Mary. As she will cradle the baby at Bethlehem, so years later she will cradle her dead son at Golgotha.

Suddenly the scene at Elizabeth's house moves into music. Mary does not speak; she sings. And what a song she sings!

We call this song the Magnificat, from the first word in the Latin translation. We also call it the Song of Mary. It is neither self-indulgent nor sentimental. Instead, what we have is an explosive celebration of the God who saves: the one who looks with favour on a humble servant, who does great things, whose name is holy. The God whose mercy is known by those who reverence him, who shows his arm to be mighty, who scatters the proud and throws down the powerful and throws out the rich, who lifts up the lowly, and leads the hungry to a banquet. The one who keeps his promise to our forbearers in faith, whose name is holy, who does great things! This is the God who sets Mary to singing, and maybe Mary, pregnant Mary, footsore after trekking up the hillside, not only sings for all she is worth, but starts to dance as well.

Mary unlocks the door to Christian joy. Mary shares her song with us, asks us to sing the Magnificat. She invites us to delight with her in the God who turns the world upside down, who saves us through this girl's courage. Whenever we might be tempted to think that the Christian faith is dull, the song of Mary tells us that the opposite is true. It is a song of exuberant joy, telling of the world turned upside down.

Mary always points us to her Son. Her existence reminds us that we can be as she is: the faithful disciple, the one who brings Christ to birth, always pointing to Jesus.

Without such joy, Christianity is ever in danger of becoming less than itself, falling into respectable dullness or mean-spirited fanaticism.

This is confident Christianity, rich with hope for this world and the next.

We live in a time when people ache for such a hope. May we help them find it in the liberating God who is the subject of Mary's song and the centre of Mary's life, the God whom we will find next weekend in the manger in Bethlehem.