

THE RADIANT JOY OF SURPRISE

PREACHER : Canon Ralph Godsall, Precentor

Rochester Cathedral
Sunday, December 24 2006
Sung Eucharist : 10.30am
Advent 4

‘When Elizabeth heard Mary’s greeting, the child leapt in her womb.’ (Luke 1:41)

Elizabeth. She thought her time was past, and now she is carrying a child. She had settled for the kitchen, the garden, for being a good neighbour, for playing her part in the wider community. And now her world has changed. Did she lie awake at night, and listen to her body, feeling the movement, reminding herself that what could scarcely be was growing within her?

Does an older mother feel the fears and fragilities of childbearing even more intensely, because it has come on her so late in the day? The sense that this is a mystery and miracle of nature. There is nothing automatic about it. It is not a birth right. It cannot be programmed, nor taken for granted. It is a gift.

And the sense that this is a fragile and demanding process, blending joy and apprehension, absorbing strength and energy, offering hope but no certainties, asking so much of the woman who waits with and for her child.

Hardly daring to believe it; the mingling currents of gratitude and alarm; the delight and the anxiety – there is no simple way to share all of this. Elizabeth kept her counsel, and lived with her secret for five months, the evangelist tells us. What’s the point of telling everybody, when you are still getting used to it yourself, still learning to handle the changes, still rearranging the future in your mind? Soon enough it would be secret no longer. Until then she would rather cope by herself.

Then there is Mary, voice at the door, friend and cousin, and sister in hope and expectation. The young mother, the girl for whom family life has come more quickly, more abruptly than she would have thought or wanted.

Not for her the years of waiting that Elizabeth had known. Not for her the normal order of things, the usual sequences of life and relationship, but the promise and purpose of God, and the disruption of the pattern and plans of her years. Not only her body, but her whole life too, seems stretched and burdened by the presence within. Does she also wake at night, wondering if it was all a dream?

Mary’s experience, like Elizabeth’s, would not be easily shared. It was easier to keep it within, to hold her own counsel and ponder the matter in her heart. The folks at home would have struggled to understand. A distant cousin, living with her own surprise, would offer a safe and sensitive ear. So here is this two-woman ante-natal group, exchanging gentle words of hope and courage and love.

This is girls’ time, private time, time of quiet and help and care, for getting used together to the joy and responsibility that have been put upon them.

'Blessed are you', says Elizabeth. The veil dividing time from eternity has become very thin. God is stirring. The text will go on to Mary's Magnificat, a mighty song of praise and promise. But for a moment before that, as the two women meet and greet, they sense afresh the wonder of what God is doing – in them and with them.

Elizabeth and Mary stand at the pivot point. 'The hinge of history', it has been said, 'hangs on the door of a Bethlehem stable.'

One of these babies will be God's prophet; the other is God's human presence. In these two women's response to grace, their little support group, their greeting and fear and joy, is the focus of all humanity's life before God – of the world waiting in hope, of the nations beckoned to faith, of earth's divided people learning again to love.

Elizabeth – in middle age, disturbed by grace, prodded out of life's even groove and steady routine, discovering something new of God when the wisdom of experience would have said that her years could hold nothing new, just more of the same.

Mary – on the threshold of adulthood, discovering that her life will count for more than she would have guessed, yet facing the disruption and amendment of her plans, the prospect of days more complicated, more costly, than she would ever expect.

This God, whose word takes flesh in Mary's body and Mary's son, is still a God of surprise and disturbance – the God of peace, yet also a God who interrupts peace with promise.

God regularly says to middle-aged people: 'Do not assume that you have seen it all, that I have nothing more to give you, to share with you, to teach you and to accomplish through you. Do not settle into your disappointments: they may be places of growth, but let them never become places of refuge. Keep your feet on the ground, but keep your eyes looking forward and upward.'

And this same God often says to younger people: 'I really value you. I can do things for the world through your living that will be unique and special. Your life will count for more than you expect. But it may not lead you along a simple or straightforward path. You will need to be committed, and to trust.'

God works most truly and deeply through us when we are surprised and taken aback, when we have to start again and think anew about how we live and what we look for. Even – indeed especially – through disrupted lives.

Often by rearranging plans we had made, God uses us to reshape what is happening around us. Sometimes in jolting us out of our groove, God helps us to be more sensitive to difficulties our neighbours have to bear.

And yet this same disturbing God constantly brings joy and gladness to birth. This gospel, of glory taking flesh, still lifts hearts in hope and praise. This good news of Mary's son, God's presence and person in our humanity, makes voices sing and spirits dance. When Jesus is on the scene, when God is at work, when the Spirit is moving, we may not find the monochrome peace of predictable plans, of steady, settled living, of a known way through the years.

God is too fresh, too lively, for that. But we shall regularly be given the radiant joy of surprise, the delight of fellowship that spans and gathers our separate lives, and glad amazement at the newness, the wonder, the glory, of God's work in our world – and in our own lives.

