

## **Sermon for 22<sup>nd</sup> December 2024, Year C, Advent 4**

**Preached at St Serf Shettleston**

**Luke 1:39-55**

### **Sermon**

Today is the fourth and final Sunday of Advent, and we finally come to focus on Mary, and hear about her visit to her relative Elizabeth who is of course carrying baby John who will later become the famous Baptist.

This is one of those very rare moments in the Bible when two women are recorded in conversation without any men present – unless you count their two unborn sons!

Here we encounter the precious voices of the most lowly in their society: Mary who had become pregnant before marriage and not by Joseph, and Elizabeth who had been childless and barren. Both would have been considered failures, forsaken by God, and accordingly to be ostracised from society. Their society and religion taught barren or loose women that they were largely worthless, but let's not forget that when these two pregnant women met, their main topic of conversation was the overthrow of authoritarian empire!

First, though, Elizabeth declares her amazement at her suddenly-blessed circumstances: "And why has this happened to me?" she says. She is a woman who had never been used to receiving blessing. She is experiencing a miraculous acceptance by God, in contrast to the rejection she would have felt in society. This appears to reflect the nature of God – that the more humble we are, the more intimately we seem to be able to experience him.

I wonder if this is something to do with the barriers caused by the false faces that most of us often feel we need to put on in order to fit in, or to maintain

our status in society? Many of us learn to build up our emotional defences to pretend everything is fine and we're winning at life, but these walls inevitably cut us off from each other, and even cut us off from God. Mary and Elizabeth have no such walls.

I think this is why Jesus spent so much time with those on the margins of society, especially the women. They were the ones who were unable to play the game of one-upmanship, unable to obtain wealth and power. They had no way to hide their shame and apparent failure, and so the only thing left for them is utter humility, honesty and simplicity.

Through poverty, misfortune, and marginalisation, people like Mary and Elizabeth have become exactly the sort of people that God seeks out and most enjoys, to the extent that they are the ones chosen and blessed to be the mothers of Jesus and John.

Throughout the centuries since, many Christians have sought to follow in this path of humility, recognising that this road is indeed very narrow and difficult to walk. Given the choice, we human beings will almost always seek comfort and security rather than humble authenticity. We prefer respect and praise; we want to be taken notice of; we like to be given authority and control. Too often we resemble the disciples James and John, asking Jesus for the highest places at his right hand and his left.

Occasionally, when I was in the Church of England, some high-powered intellectual vicar would feel the need to disparage the small provincial part-time college I studied at for my theology degree. Usually, they would declare such training to be not only utterly inferior to their own, but only really suitable for middle-aged women with little intellectual capacity for theological preaching. And then they would bemoan that such women had taken over the church. But do I respond with humility to such claims? No, sadly I do not. I instinctively defend my credentials. I raise up my shield of pride and own my sword of disdain.

In contrast, the holy saints often lived in poverty or gave away any wealth or status they were born with. Many monks and nuns left palaces and wealthy merchant families to become anonymous and penniless. They saw in Mary and Elizabeth, and in John, and Jesus himself, a glorious, authentic, virtuous, affirming humanity that was inaccessible to those who cling to wealth, power or status.

As soon as someone has 'stuff' or a reputation they can't bear to lose, it's like a chasm opens up between them and the blessings of God's love. It is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the Kingdom of God. Jesus wasn't kidding. If we rely on money and status and achievements for our self-worth, there will always be a barrier between ourselves and God – a barrier of our own making, not his.

This is why the story of Jesus' birth is so important to us, even today. Whatever our place in society, this story of a simple family, struggling to meet the indifferent demands of the authorities, marginalised, poor, temporarily homeless, sofa-surfing if you will – this story draws us in, until even the most hard-hearted of us will begin to soften with compassion and identify with the humble and lowly. Suddenly, for a brief moment, we may feel what it is like to be utterly exposed and vulnerable, defenceless, but loved and sustained by God.

Who can feel themselves to be truly loved, unless they know that they have nothing to deserve or earn it? When I was a novice nun, the other nuns helped me experience belonging not by praising what I could do, but by making it clear that none of that mattered – only the humility to be willing to say 'yes' to what was asked of me.

Holy Communion can be like this as well. We may be caught up in the mystery of the baby Jesus and choirs of angels only once a year, but every week the sharing of bread and wine together has the same message: None of us have anything to offer to God, except our humble spirit. Around the table of the Lord, none of us are higher or lower. Our skills and abilities and wealth and status,

even our families, all of these were given to us by God. Every time we receive the bread and wine, we can for a moment lose ourselves in love and wonder. We come with nothing; the only gift we have is ourselves, our souls and bodies, a humble sacrifice of trusting love, just like Mary.

Perhaps, ironically, in this modern age of secularism, commercialism and celebrity, it is becoming easier for Christians to remember what it means to be humble and lowly. Not many decades ago, Christendom still dominated society. Princes, lairds, and wealthy merchants built churches by the dozen, and received honours aplenty while they lived, and fine tombs when they died. The finest minds and wealthiest members of society found status and respect, power and control through the Church, and they elbowed each other out of the way to reach the highest places at Christ's table, missing the point entirely.

But now our churches know what it means to be marginalised, to have no power, to be unloved by society and un-listened to, to be struggling to get by, to be serving without hope of respect or reward. We've finally stopped pretending to be King Herod, and we've once again begun to recognise ourselves as Mary and Elizabeth, and now perhaps we too can begin to sing Mary's song – the Magnificat – with true honesty, praising God not only for his blessings and mercy and our daily survival, but also for the tearing down of powerful oppressors and disregard for the rich who come in and assume that all good things should naturally belong to them.

Mary is showing us the best way to come to God as our true authentic selves, realising that we have nothing but humility, gratitude, and a gentle spirit to offer, but that this is absolutely everything asked of us. As the old carol goes: *“What can I give him? Poor as I am. If I were a shepherd I would give a lamb. If I were a wise man I would do my part. But what I can I give him. Give him my heart. Give him my heart.”*