

Sermon 19.12.21

Advent 4

By Joy Dipple

Micah 5:2-5a Luke 1:39-55

When did you last receive good news? – something that put a smile on your face – something that you couldn't wait to tell someone else? As I was delivering Christmas cards in our road one of my neighbours excitedly told me that she had become a grandparent for the first time. It was certainly something she wanted to tell everyone. It really was good news.

In our Gospel reading Mary had just received the revelation that she was to give birth to the messiah. Now she dashes off to see her older relative Elizabeth whose pregnancy had also been revealed to Mary. There was excitement and a desire to share together the parts that both women would play in the Gospel story. Both were devout Jewish women who knew their scriptures and the promise of a messiah to bring freedom to their nation. Both had received divine revelations. Elizabeth's husband Zechariah, a priest, had been allocated to burn incense in the temple of the Lord, and whilst there he had been spoken to by an angel who told him that Elizabeth would become pregnant despite her advanced years, and would give birth to John the Baptist, the one who would prepare the way for the Lord.

There would be future sadness, but for now both Elizabeth and Mary shared the excitement of these revelations about being part of the divine story, revelations that were no figment of the imagination, but a reality that came true, as testified by their miraculous pregnancies. Elizabeth was in awe that the mother of her Lord should visit her, and Mary herself responded with the wonderful words of the Magnificat. Both were under the prophetic guidance of the Holy Spirit.

There were divine visitations. Now there are divine words of prophecy as God's kingdom is described in Mary's song. The desire of the Jewish nation to see their messiah was a hope that he would come as a warrior king to defeat the Romans and free Israel from its slavery to that Empire, but those hopes would end in disappointment. God's kingdom wouldn't be about wars to regain earthly territory. It would be a deeper solution about changing people's hearts, a spiritual victory rather than an earthly one. Mary's words show the upside down nature of God's kingdom – the scattering of the proud, the lifting up of the humble; the feeding of the hungry with good things and the rich being sent away empty. There would be mercy for God's people.

Rulers would be brought down from their thrones, and mighty deeds would be performed; but by God's power, not human effort.

Influenced by the Holy Spirit, Mary's words give a true description of God's kingdom that resonates with the human spirit at a deep level. It is the agenda of the Church as we seek to spread the good news of God's kingdom. The self-seeking values of the secular world are literally a world apart from God's values that seek the good of others rather than the self. Christians need to be a beacon of light in proclaiming God's values, and His love and mercy, rather than courting the values of the world. We will be disliked for it, but if we fail to proclaim God's kingdom then we have nothing of value to say. We just become absorbed by the world, and God's power is diminished because there ceases to be a recognition of sin, repentance and mercy. Mary spoke of God's promise of mercy extending through Abraham's descendants. It was the message of Elizabeth's son as the forerunner of Christ, and it is still our message to the world now. A recognition of sin is necessary for repentance, and then to avail ourselves of God's mercy; mercy that is ours through Christ's coming into the world to become the sacrificial lamb for us. The Magnificat speaks of God's kingdom in a way that would only be fully understood in the passage of time as people followed Jesus, and it is hugely relevant to us now in the church's role of proclaiming the good news of the Kingdom.

But secondly, as we hear the story of God's divine intervention in the lives of Elizabeth and Mary, how relevant to us are those stories today? It was real for the two women and led to their excitement of being part of God's story. God's intervention still takes place in our world today in quite remarkable ways, especially in places where Christians are under persecution. We are perhaps more privileged and envied in this country by those who live elsewhere who really struggle to safely express their faith. Are we in danger of taking our faith too lightly? There are stories of people who have been imprisoned for their faith who have profoundly felt the presence of Christ in their prison cells. There are stories of people experiencing dreams and visions that have led them to investigate the reality of the Christian faith for themselves. There are even Damascus road experiences by those who have persecuted others, and then found that Christ is real. These things still happen. Let us still expect God to intervene in our world as we proclaim the good news of God's kingdom. Let us still pray for people to respond and to experience the presence of Christ for themselves – the one who came into our world 2000 years ago, but who was and always will be the one true king.