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At the School of Mary and Elizabeth

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The evangelist Luke is skilled at describing encounters. The first two chapters are filled with special meetings involving the angel Gabriel (1:8-23, 26-38), other angels (2:8-20) or the Holy Spirit (2:25-35).² The meeting between Mary and Elizabeth is of a different status with no angels in attendance. Unfortunately, this meeting, popularly known as the Visitation, is often misunderstood. Many assume that Mary rushes to Elizabeth's side to assist her in the final stages of pregnancy. This assumption falters given that Mary departs before the birth. Furthermore, the figures of Zechariah and Mary are so prominent in the first chapter, that Elizabeth's role tends to be overlooked. The revelatory encounter of the two women is the consequence of divine intervention and the result of the positive response of *both* women to the action of God in their lives. A careful tracing of their personal stories is in order.

A PIOUS CHILDLESS COUPLE

Elizabeth and Zechariah are the first characters to emerge in the Gospel story. They are married and each has a priestly lineage, which situates both spouses in the history of their people. This is especially the case for Elizabeth, since her ancestor Aaron is linked to the Exodus, the founding moment of Israel as a people. The pair are righteous before God and walk blamelessly in all the commandments of the Lord. Of the many pious biblical figures few match this couple. It is therefore a shock to learn that they are childless. While both are advanced in years, the lack of offspring is specifically attributed to Elizabeth who is incapable of bearing children. Elizabeth joins a long line of such women, Sarah, Rebekah, Rachel and the wife of Manoah, who ultimately

- 1 This is a modified version of a talk delivered at the Oblate Retreat Day at Glenstal Abbey on 2nd November 2019.
- 2 As references to the Gospel of Luke are frequent, only chapter and verse numbers will be indicated. All references to the Old Testament are to the Greek version of the text.

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conceive and whose offspring play key roles in salvation history. The birth of a child to a barren woman is a sign of the delivery of Israel (Isa 54:1; 66:9). There is an unresolved tension in the mention of Elizabeth's barrenness. The expectation is that God will provide the elderly couple with an heir as so often in the past, but it is perhaps strange that the focus of the story passes to Zechariah rather than to Elizabeth, who is the one unable to bear a child.

ZECHARIAH'S UNBELIEF

Sometime later when Zechariah officiates at the temple in Jerusalem, the lot falls to him to enter the sanctuary to offer sacrifice. The angel Gabriel appears and proclaims that in answer to his prayer his wife Elizabeth will bear a son, who is to be called John. There will be joy and gladness and John will be filled with the Holy Spirit even before his birth (1:13-15). The name of the infant, which signifies "God is gracious", encapsulates how God works in the lives of the aged couple. It is expected that they would be first to rejoice at this great news. Even though the prediction of the birth resembles the pattern of many such announcements in the Old Testament (OT), Zechariah nevertheless protests that he and his wife are advanced in years. Because he fails to believe, Gabriel announces the Lord's judgement: Zechariah will be unable to speak until the fulfilment of the proclamation. Immediately rendered mute, he cannot speak the blessing over the assembled people waiting outside the sanctuary. After his service he returns home.

ELIZABETH HIDES HERSELF

At home, Zechariah lies with his wife in his first act of obedience to the command of the angel and she conceives. While Zechariah remains mute, Elizabeth speaks and thereby reveals her interpretation of events: "This is what the Lord has done for me when he gazed upon me and took away the disgrace I have endured among my people." (1:25) The verb "to gaze upon" occurs frequently in the OT and often indicates divine favour or salvation: Abel and his offering (Gen 4:4); Hagar in the desert (Gen 16:13). God's favourable gaze shines particularly on those in affliction, such as Hagar, but also the people in slavery in Egypt (Exod 2:23-25) or the psalmist: "I will exult and rejoice in your steadfast love, because you have gazed favourably upon my humiliation" (Ps 30:8). Elizabeth recognises how while others look *unfavourably* towards her, the Lord gazes *favourably* upon her and removes her public shame. Elizabeth joins a long line of Jewish mothers,

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especially Leah and Rachel,³ who acknowledge the Lord at work in their pregnancies. While Zechariah failed to believe the angel Gabriel, Elizabeth recognises that she has been under the divine gaze and greatly graced by it. Her words anticipate those of Mary, “The Lord has done great things for me.”

Although this is joyous news which Elizabeth might be expected to share, instead, she hides herself for five months (1:24). Earlier readers are told of Elizabeth’s piety (1:6) and now are shown her piety through her respectful response. Since Elizabeth recognises that what she carries in her womb is the fruit of the Lord’s favourable action, rather than immediately removing her long-suffered public disgrace, she goes into temporary seclusion. This is an appropriate response to a divine encounter, as seen in the veiling of Moses (Exod 34:33-35) and Elijah (1 Kings 19:13) and Moses’ long absences from the camp when receiving the tablets of the law (Exod 24:12-32:19; 34:1-29). Elizabeth’s seclusion is an appropriate sequel to an encounter with the divine gaze, particularly when that gaze results in an extraordinary conception. Thereby, she manifests her acceptance of God’s intervention. While Zechariah refused to believe the divine words spoken by Gabriel, Elizabeth reads the signs of the Lord’s action on her behalf and believes.

A VIRGIN’S PONDERING

The angel Gabriel is sent again but on this occasion to Nazareth. The time is no longer measured in political terms (the reign of Herod) but in reference to the pregnancy of Elizabeth, now in her sixth month. This second birth announcement by Gabriel invites comparison with the first. The priest at the public cultic setting of the Jerusalem temple contrasts with the modest virgin at an undisclosed location in the insignificant Galilean town of Nazareth (John 1:46).⁴ The details of the virgin’s betrothed are first given, Joseph of the house of David, before the name of the virgin is revealed as ‘Miriam’, translated ‘Mary’ in English bibles. The name recalls Moses and Aaron’s sister and her most memorable intervention in the OT, namely her song of liberation after the crossing of the Red Sea (Exod 15). In contrast to Zechariah and

3 The older sister names her son Reuben “because the Lord has looked on my affliction; surely now my husband will love me” (Gen 29:32), while Rachel at the birth of Joseph states: “the Lord has taken away my disgrace” (Gen 30:23). See Amy-Jill Levine and Ben Witherington III, *The Gospel of Luke*. New Cambridge Bible Commentary. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017) 32.

4 In the Western artistic tradition, it is assumed to be a home, while it is often a well in the East, a favoured location for the initiation of betrothals (Jacob and Rachel [Gen 29:1], Moses and Zipporah [Exod 2:15-22], etc.). This latter tradition reads the incarnation as God’s betrothal of his people.

Elizabeth, there is no mention of genealogy or piety. As she has yet to marry, she is most probably a young maiden of no particular status.

Gabriel greets Mary: “Rejoice, O highly favoured one, the Lord is with you.” (1:28) Mary is confused at the initial greeting. In contrast to Zechariah, who remained in his fearful confusion at the vision of Gabriel (1:12), her focus is on the spoken words (1:29). The greeting mysteriously links Mary and the Lord. God has granted his favour to her although she had no claim to a worthy status. She has been raised up from a position of lowliness and been chosen for a special role. Mary’s pondering attempts to come to an understanding. Her unspoken thoughts are answered by Gabriel reaffirming her status as favoured by God before proclaiming her conception and birth of a son named Jesus who is Son of the Most High and whose kingdom will be without end (1:30-33).

MARY’S QUESTION – FAITH SEEKING UNDERSTANDING

Despite the divine revelation regarding her son, which explains in what way she is favoured, Mary remains grounded in her own human limitations. She asks *how* this will happen, since she is a virgin (1:34), the third time her virginal status is alluded to. At first glance Mary’s question appears to resemble Zechariah’s objection: “By what shall I know this? For I am an old man and my wife is getting on in years.” (1:18) There are significant differences. Mary doesn’t focus on herself but on ‘this’, the divine initiative of the birth of the Son of God. Secondly, Mary does not question that what has been proclaimed will come to pass. There is no doubting the fulfilment of the divine word. Mary questions not God’s ability, but her own ability to play her part in the divine initiative. Since she does not know a man, a euphemism for carnal knowledge, Mary regards herself as incapable of fulfilling the divine design. She seeks a different type of knowledge so that she may have the elements to believe and be able to align herself with the divine initiative.⁵

Birth predictions similar to that made to Zechariah have been made and fulfilled on many occasions in the OT with the births of Isaac (Gen 21:1-3), Samson (Judg 13:24), Samuel (1 Sam 1:20) etc. Zechariah’s questioning of Gabriel’s prediction represents a failure of memory on his part. In contrast, Mary rightly remembers that there is no account of a virgin birth in the OT. Mary both

5 The discussion of Mary’s question and the comparison with Zechariah’s question draws heavily from Mark Coleridge, *The Birth of the Lukan Narrative. Narrative as Christology in Luke 1-2* (JSNTSS 88; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993) 64-65.

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hears the words of the angel and engages with them, drawing on her memory of salvation history. Mary rightly deduces that God is doing something *new* in the tradition of Israel, and therefore she must question how this will come to pass.

RESPONSE AND SIGN

Gabriel replies in poetic verse, repeating how Mary will conceive and the implications for the child to be born:

The Holy *Spirit* will *come upon* you,
and the *power* of the Most High will *overshadow* you;
therefore, the child to be born will be holy;
he will be called Son of God.

God will bring about the conception through the power of his Holy Spirit, which will come down from above to rest over Mary. The descent of the Spirit over the waters of the womb evokes the hovering of the Spirit of God over the waters at the beginning of creation (Gen 1:2) and suggests a new creation in which Mary will be intimately involved. Furthermore, the overshadowing recalls that of the cloud of divine glory over the tent of meeting accompanying the people in the desert (Exod 33:9; 40:34-38; Num 9:15-23), guiding them all the way to the promised land, before coming to rest in the sanctuary of the Temple at Jerusalem (1 Kings 8:10). It is somewhat surprising that the shadow of divine glory will rest not in the sanctuary but over a humble virgin. Mary now has the elements to understand how the Lord is with her. Under the divine shadow, she is empowered to conceive. As the Spirit is holy, so the child will be holy. As the power is divine, so the child will be Son of God. The divine presence which overshadows Mary comes to rest in the child that she conceives.

Gabriel now gives Mary a *sign* which connects back to the preceding story of Zechariah and especially Elizabeth. Whereas the annunciations of the births first emphasise the contrasting responses of Zechariah and Mary, the concluding focus shifts to Elizabeth and links the two women. Only now is it learned that Mary and Elizabeth are related. Both women overcome significant obstacles and conceive. The earlier emphasis on Mary's virginity is now paralleled by the double obstacle to Elizabeth's conception, her great age and barrenness. However, Elizabeth has already conceived a son and is in her sixth month for nothing is impossible for God (1:37). The double obstacle to her conceiving is acknowledged, the better to highlight the divine role in bringing about this conception. Elizabeth's pregnancy shows Mary that God's projected plan has already begun.

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Mary acquiesces fully in the divine plan: “Behold the handmaid of the Lord, let it be done to me according to your word” (1:38). She accepts Gabriel’s witness concerning God’s omnipotence (nothing is impossible for God), his reliability and authority (let it be done to me according to your word) and her own status as a servant of God (behold the handmaid of the Lord).⁶ Mary recognises the power and promise of the overshadowing divine glory. God’s plan is already well advanced in Elizabeth and is set to begin imminently in Mary.

MARY VISITS ELIZABETH

After the angel’s departure, Mary departs with haste for the home of Zechariah in the Judean hill country. Mary is the first of a series of characters, such as the shepherds (2:15-16) and Simeon (2:25-28), who will hear divine revelation and later go and verify it and afterwards share it joyfully with others. While the earlier birth announcements were made by Gabriel, Mary carries forward the story of salvation by her own response of faith. Although the wonder of Elizabeth’s pregnancy is not on the scale of a virgin birth, it is the confirmatory sign that has been given to Mary that she herself will conceive. Mary will share the joyful news of their pregnancies and especially God’s role in each.

GREETING AND LEAP

Upon entry to the house, Mary greets her kinswoman. Elizabeth describes vividly how she immediately hears this greeting: “the sound of your greeting came into my ears.” (1:44). This listening reaches from inner ear to the depths of her womb for it causes the infant within her to leap with great joy. The term “leap” is employed twice to speak metaphorically of the reaction of mountains to the presence of the Lord (Ps 113:4-7). Rebekah’s twins Jacob and Esau also leap in her womb, which presages the divine revelation of their destinies (Gen 25:21-23). The leap points to an imminent divine manifestation. John was predicted to be filled with the Holy Spirit while already in the womb (1:15). While John’s leap indicates his responsiveness to the Spirit, Elizabeth manifests the Holy Spirit’s action in her by her perception of the infant’s joyful leap and her proclamation. Earlier Elizabeth perceived the Lord’s implicit action in her conception and pregnancy (1:25) and now, through her attentive listening, she perceives the Holy Spirit’s action within her in response to Mary’s greeting.

6 Coleridge, *The Birth of the Lukan Narrative*, 70.

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ELIZABETH AND THE MOTHER OF HER LORD

Elizabeth with a great shout proclaims both Mary and the infant in her womb blessed and questions her worthiness to receive the mother of her Lord (1:42-43). Elizabeth had no foreknowledge of Mary's visit and yet by her listening and openness to the Spirit is the first person on earth to acclaim the newly conceived Jesus as Lord. Elizabeth concludes by again acclaiming Mary: "blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfilment of what was spoken to her by the Lord." (1:45). Elizabeth acknowledges the stages that have brought Mary to this point. The Lord first spoke of a promise, a child Jesus, Son of God, that would be conceived through the Holy Spirit. Mary believed that this promise would be fulfilled and has travelled to Elizabeth to verify the first sign of fulfilment revealed to her by Gabriel. By reporting the reaction of her infant and by acclaiming Mary as mother of the Lord, Elizabeth reveals that the promised child is already conceived. It is important to note how God is active in both women. There is no further need of Gabriel, as the women's faith is open to the action of the Holy Spirit within each of them and in their infants.

MARY'S SONG

Mary responds to Elizabeth's revelation by a prolonged song of praise as sang by her ancestor Miriam at the Red Sea (Exod 15). Mary is a true descendent of Miriam, as Elizabeth is of Miriam's brother Aaron. The kinswomen's relationship stretches back to the origins of people at the moment of their liberation. While Elizabeth in a short verse acknowledged God's favour towards herself (1:25), Mary sings in a long hymn her praise of God and how God has shown favour to herself and to his people (1:46-55). The appropriate response in the Gospel of Luke to a divine manifestation is to give glory to God (2:20) and becomes a refrain of those healed or those who witness such healings (5:25-26; 7:16; 13:13; 17:15; 18:43). While Elizabeth is the prototype for acknowledging divine action in one's life, Mary is the prototype for all those who sing God's praises in response to the divine favour shown to them.

CONCLUSION

This short essay has brought to the fore the important role of the kinswomen Elizabeth and Mary at the beginning of Luke's Gospel. At this time of Advent and Christmas, they both appear frequently in the lectionary readings. Through their response to divine revelation, they are role models for all those awaiting expectantly

Christ's coming. Both recognise that the Lord is at work in their lives and in the lives of their infants. Both respond respectfully and humbly to the divine gaze, Elizabeth, foregoing the opportunity to immediately proclaim the removal of her shame, spends five months in seclusion. Her pregnancy only becomes more widely known through Mary's visit, at the instigation of the angel Gabriel. Elizabeth responds according to the divine timetable, not her own. Elizabeth is also a model of deep listening, a listening that goes to the core of her being and results in the response of her infant in the womb and in her being filled with the Holy Spirit. Mother and son are related to Jesus through their responsiveness to him rather by their genealogies: "My mother and brothers and sisters are those who hear the word of God and do it." (8:21). Finally, they are privileged to be the first to proclaim Jesus as Lord.

Mary listens carefully, remembers and engages with the divine word spoken by Gabriel. She has faith that God will bring about what has never happened before, a virgin birth, but seeks to understand how. Her faith seeks to understand, so that her faith may grow ever more. The further revelation of the coming of the divine shadow upon her reveals how this will happen and she gives her full and humble assent as a slave of the Lord. Mary anticipates the action of Jesus at the last supper and passion: "I am here among you as one who serves" (22:27b). Elizabeth's blessing of Mary reviews the events of the annunciation, emphasising Mary's listening and her belief in the words that they would be fulfilled. At the beginning of a Gospel full of predictions, Elizabeth and Mary are parabolic figures, showcasing possible avenues for readers to grow in faith and understanding.

Consulting the Faithful. The role of the Laity is an important topic in today's Church. Newman's acknowledgement of the role of the laity in the Church is generally regarded as a milestone in his thought.

- BISHOP FINTAN MONAHAN, *A Perfect Peace, Newman Saint for Our Time*, (Dublin: Veritas) p.45.