23 December 2018: Choral Eucharist
The Fourth Sunday of Advent
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+ ‘Blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfilment of what was spoken to her by the Lord.’ (Luke 1: 45)

We are nearly there. There are just one-and-a-half shopping days left before Christmas and much of the waiting of Advent is over. We stand in the darkest part of the year on the brink of something new: the new gift that God is about to give us through the birth of his son, Immanuel, God with us. Throughout this season we have yearned for that coming with eager anticipation, made ourselves ready, awakening from our natural sleepy complacency to consider our lives afresh in the light of the gift of God’s incarnate self. Yet that coming doesn’t merely challenge our sense of self, it threatens to overturn the natural order, confronting us in unexpected ways.

For the inscrutable sovereign mystery of the person of Jesus rests on contradiction: he is both the baby, born of the woman in labour of whom Micah prophesied (5: 3), and he is also the Saviour who has come to do God’s will, abolishing the first order to establish the second, as the author to the Hebrews wrote (10: 9). He is the promised Messiah, who offers continuity with the old dynasty of Israel, the promises made by the prophets. But he will also overthrow the old ways of worship (‘sacrifices and offerings you have not desired’ Heb 10: 5) and will institute, and in his holy gospel command us to continue, a new rite, a perpetual memory of his precious death: ‘a body you have prepared for me’ (Heb 10: 5).

Yet we are not quite there yet. This morning’s gospel took us not to Bethlehem but back to the springtime of the year and the beginning of the story. It reminded us of the critical roles played in the great narrative of redemption not only by Mary, the mother of our Lord, but by her cousin Elizabeth, wife of the priest Zechariah. We joined Luke’s narrative immediately after Mary had had her encounter with the angel and declared her willingness to accept God’s charge: ‘Here I am, the servant of the Lord, let it be with me...’
according to your will.’ (Lk 1: 38) The angel Gabriel’s visit occurred, as you will recall, ‘in the sixth month’; not in the sixth month of the year (obviously: we mark that date in March, nine months before Christmas), but the in sixth month of Elizabeth’s equally-unexpected pregnancy.

In those days (after the angel’s visit), Mary set off into the hill country to visit her cousin Elizabeth, who had recently conceived in her old age, having been barren all her life. This may seem a small, inconsequential episode in the greater narrative. But to pass over this encounter is to ignore the work of the Holy Spirit in giving new understanding to both women about the events in which they had so central a role to play.

Mary and Elizabeth came from the same wider family, but from different generations; whether they knew one another well we cannot know, but we might wonder how much they might previously have had in common. Mary was young, poor, pregnant, and unmarried, while Elizabeth was married to a Temple priest and came herself from a priestly lineage. She was now old and had thought herself far beyond child-bearing. Yet they came together in their shared experience of miraculous conception, each unexpectedly caught up in the divine plan for the salvation of humanity.

Some modern theologians have queried Mary’s motives in visiting Elizabeth, wondering – worrying vicariously on her behalf – whether she felt the need for some confirmation of the message that the angel had brought her. Although she had answered Gabriel confidently enough, did she later have second thoughts and want the support and affirmation of her elderly relative? Going to visit Elizabeth would enable her to verify the angel’s statement that ‘this was the sixth month for her who was said to be barren’ (Luke 1: 36) and so help her to accept the truth of what the angel promised for her. Calvin wrote (rather patronisingly) that Mary ‘was above all right to seize upon the help afforded her, if she did not wish to reject what the Lord had deliberately put before her.’

I prefer to read this passage with an earlier theologian, the Venerable Bede, who saw Mary’s visit to Elizabeth differently. Rather than looking for her cousin’s help, Mary went to offer her own support and succour to her older relative. In a sermon for the 4th Sunday of Advent, Bede wrote, ‘as soon as the angel had returned to heaven, Mary rose and bearing God in her womb she betook herself to the dwelling places of the servants of God’ (in other words to Zechariah and Elizabeth) and sought conversation with them. She went to Elizabeth knowing that she would bear the Lord’s servant and precursor.
‘It was not that she was doubtful concerning the account which she had received’, Bede wrote, ‘but she went so that she could offer her congratulations concerning the gift which she had learned her fellow servant had received. This was not in order to prove the word of the angel by the attestation of a woman. Rather it was so that as an attentive young virgin she might commit herself to ministry to a woman of advanced age.’ Mary’s visit was, for Bede, an act of humility and charity, explaining what had happened to Elizabeth while sharing her own good news. Elizabeth had had no angelic visitation of her own, nor could her husband tell her about his while he remained dumb.

Through the working of the Holy Spirit, Mary’s visit achieved just what she must, on Bede’s account, have hoped it would. When Elizabeth heard her cousin’s greeting, the child leapt in her womb, the first sign of the fulfilment of Gabriel’s promise to Zechariah that ‘even before his birth, he will be filled with the Holy Spirit (Luke 1: 15). Elizabeth, similarly Spirit-filled, announced a blessing on both Mary and her unborn Son. She could not speak with a moderate voice, Bede wrote, because the Spirit had set her ‘on fire’, literally she was burning (flagrabat). She blessed Mary and the fruit of Mary’s womb, the one, conceived of the flesh of a virgin mother, who would be called and would be the Son of the Most High.

Further, Elizabeth blessed Mary for having believed that there would be a fulfilment of what was spoken to her by the Lord. She made the important connection between Mary’s blessing and Mary’s believing the words of the angel (a pointed contrast with the doubtful response of her own husband). Elizabeth’s joy, and her report of the joy of her unborn son leaping her womb, led Mary to express her own delight and her faith in God as she launched into the song: ‘my soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour.’ (Luke 1: 46)

Like Mary and Elizabeth, we too are awaiting a birth, but one that we know predicts a death. On Monday evening last week, the organ scholars gave us a wonderful performance of Messiaen’s great work La nativité du Seigneur. Over nine movements, Messiaen meditates on a collection of biblical texts that traverse the story of the nativity, but also touch on Christ’s ultimate fate, already immanent in his incarnation. Even as we delight in the shared joy of Mary and Elizabeth, we recall that both their sons will cruelly be put to death. As Simeon will say to Mary at the Presentation, ‘a sword will pierce your own soul also.’ Messiaen addressed this in the seventh movement, ‘Jesus accepte la souffrance’, Jesus accepts his suffering. There he reflected on a verse from our reading from the letter to the Hebrews: ‘On entering the world, Christ says to his father,
Sacrifices and offerings you have not desired, but a body you have prepared for me; Here I am.' (Heb 10: 5) That body, which suffered on the cross for our redemption, we will shortly consume as bread in the eucharist; we will take and eat in remembrance that he died for us.

And so, it was the final movement, the thrilling summation of all the theological and thematic elements of La nativité, that spoke to me most directly on Monday. ‘Dieu parmi nous’, God among us (God with us: Immanuel). Messiaen took verses from the opening of John’s gospel and from Luke to encapsulate the significance of God dwelling among us. As we prepare to meet our incarnate Lord in bread and wine in this Eucharist, we too may speak these words, rejoicing in the great mystery of the incarnation and so sharing a little of the joy of Mary, blessed among all women. Messiaen’s text reads

Words of the communicant, of the virgin, of the whole Church: “He who created me dwells in my tent, the word was made flesh and lived in me. My soul magnifies the Lord, my spirit rejoices in God my saviour.” (John 1: 14; Luke 1: 46, 47)

May it be our joy this Christmas to know the presence of God among us, to hear again the wonderful story of our redemption. May we then rejoice with the angels and the shepherds, responding to the miracle of the incarnation by lifting up our voices to affirm our confident faith in our redeeming Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ.

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1 Calvin, Harmony of the Gospels, ed. Torrance, Torrance and Morrison, 1972, p. 31; quoted Feasting on the Word, C. 1, p. 92.