



HOMILY by Father Robbie Low

4th Sunday of Advent - Year C

The child in her womb leapt for joy

Readings: Micah 5: 1-4, Ps 79, Hebrews 10: 5-10, Luke 1: 39-44

The great apocalypse begins here. The fulcrum of history, on which tilts the eternal balance of justice and mercy, is put in place. The final revelation of the cosmic destiny of Man unfolds.

But it is not divulged in a palace nor in the full glare of imperial state. It is not beaten out on the anvils of tyranny or on the battlefields of warring nations. It does not emerge from the seats of learning or the schools of rhetoric or philosophy. It is not uncovered in the laboratories of the scientific quest nor prophesied in even the greatest art.

This 'reveal', that is the beginning of all the questions of the plot of salvation history and the end of all the answers, takes place out of the spotlight of history in a small presbytery in a little hill town in an unconsidered country. It concerns the meeting of two women....and their unborn children.

One is a maid, newly with child in perplexing and implausible circumstances. We forget that today, when half of our children are born out of wedlock, what a shocking proposition this was to our forebears and

what danger, mortal danger, Mary was in – how vital Joseph’s courage and faith in defending her and marrying her.

The other is an old woman, past child bearing, the wife of the local priest, who, miracle of miracles, is now joyfully pregnant.

Today, in an age of designer children and test tube babies, Man can create both a virgin birth and enliven a dormant womb. It is a pitiful irony that what man now takes as given scientific practice he doubts that God Almighty could ever have achieved.

Here maid and *mater miraculosa* meet to share their utterly unlooked for and truly shocking joy, spend time together in these first secret months when each their child is both absolute being and yet still becoming.

And something remarkable happens in this Visitation. Elizabeth, the vicar’s wife, the long and happily married, the miracle mother is given voice by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit of God to utter those words which now we pray so often and so fervently, ‘Blessed art thou among women and blessed is the fruit of thy womb’. She addresses Mary, the juvenile, the slip of a girl and she addresses the baby, the full person, newly conceived within her.

And Elizabeth, by the power of the Spirit, acknowledges, what Peter and Thomas and all the other disciples will come to understand all those years later, that the child in Mary’s womb is the Lord. ‘Why should I be honoured with a visit from the mother of my Lord?’

It is this title that is enshrined, four centuries later, in the Council of Ephesus 431 describing Mary as 'Theotokos' – the God Bearer. 'Holy Mary, Mother of God.....pray for us'.

Nor is this ancient history for recognition of Mary by Elizabeth as 'Mother of God' and its confirmation in the Councils of the undivided Church are touchstones of orthodoxy. The importance of this declaration is foundational. Its denial by the heretic Nestorius and the subsequent secession of his followers led to an eastern schism lasting a thousand years and formed the groundwork for Mohammed's mistaken Christology and the clash of civilisations which has now re-emerged in our own time.

And one thing more. Elizabeth recounts that her unborn son leapt in the womb at the approach of the unborn Jesus. He leapt, she says, 'for joy' at the approach of the Messiah. Never forget the significance of the fact that the first witness to the Messiah is an unborn child.

This revelation both affirms the Church's doctrine of Man and makes her ever resolute in the defence of the innocent.

The witness of the Baptist to the Messiah has begun. The response of the Voice to the eternal Word, the reaction of the Forerunner to the Promised One, is 'joy'. It is a witness that will go to the prison cell and to martyrdom. It begins in the hidden valleys of the hill country of Judaea. It will go on to the end of time. It begins in the loving, prayerful, courageous witness of two women. It continues in the life and ministry of their sons. It begins in the sheepfolds of Judaea. It ends in the courts of the Heavenly Jerusalem.

From this quiet and joyful meeting the Church comes to know the truth about Mary and to know the truth about her own vocation. Like Mary the Church is to be open to the Holy Spirit. Like Mary she is to be obedient to the will of God. Like Mary she is to be constantly and graciously presenting Christ to the world.

From this private family encounter the Church understands her role as preparing the way for Jesus, rejoicing in His Presence and defending always and everywhere the life of the innocent and the rights of the unborn child. She is on the side of Man against the forces of the dark. She is on the side of his salvation and his dignity, made in the image of God. She stands against the destruction and perdition of Man and for his redemption and eternal joy.

In this beautiful and sacred time of the Visitation all these mysteries come together in the quiet of the domestic scene, in the hill country of Judaea. They are the eternal mysteries which will become the final 'reveal' that will transform the fate of Man in the person of Jesus Christ, Emmanuel. In the words of the old hymn, 'God in Man made manifest.'

Gloria in excelsis Deo.

© 2015 Fowey Retreat