

## Reflection

Today, we hear the story of Mary and Elizabeth, the story of two unexpected pregnancies.

Now Elizabeth was a relative of Mary's. Elizabeth was married to Zechariah, a temple priest and both of them were old, and they were childless. In those days, when a married couple did not have children, they said that the woman was 'barren'. They did not understand a man's part in producing a child and that *he* might have fertility problems. So if the couple were childless, then it was because the woman was 'barren'. It was her fault.

Now in those days, it was a terrible thing for a woman to be barren. Because in the patriarchal society of those days, the one important function of a woman was to bear children. So, in failing to produce a child, Elizabeth brought disgrace upon herself. According to the law, her husband, Zechariah was entitled to divorce her and take another wife or concubines. But for some reason, he did not do so. But even though her husband did not divorce her, Elizabeth would have been a disgraced woman in her society, she would have felt shame at her failure. And now she was an old woman.

So this was the situation: both Zechariah and Elizabeth were elderly and childless when the Angel Gabriel appeared to Zechariah and announced that Elizabeth would become pregnant and bear him a child. Zechariah was incredulous and he questioned the angel. He said, 'Are you sure? I am an old man and my wife is well along in years.' The Angel Gabriel was offended. 'I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and have been sent to tell you this good news. And now you will not be able to speak till this baby is born because you did not believe my words.' So for his unbelief, Zechariah was struck dumb temporarily.

And sure enough, Elizabeth became pregnant. She said, "This is what the Lord has done for me in this time, when he looked favourably on me and took away the disgrace I have endured among my people." And Elizabeth went into seclusion. This child that Elizabeth was carrying was to be called John and he would grow up to be John the Baptist.

Now Elizabeth was in her sixth month of her pregnancy when the Angel Gabriel made another visit, this time, to Mary, who was Elizabeth's relative. Gabriel announced to Mary that she would become pregnant and her child would be the Son of God! Mary was a little concerned, 'How can this be, since I am a virgin?' Gabriel told her not to worry as

the Holy Spirit would take care of all that. Fortunately, Mary did not argue too much with Gabriel, and instead, she said: 'I am the Lord's servant. May it be to me as you have said.'

We are not really told much about the relationship between Mary and Elizabeth beyond the fact that they were relatives. But we can guess that they were close, because soon after the angel's visit and his astonishing announcement, Mary hurried to the town where Elizabeth lived to pay her a visit. She wanted to share her momentous news with Elizabeth.

When Mary arrives at Elizabeth's house, she calls out a greeting. You could imagine her saying something like, 'Hi Auntie Liz, it's me, Mary.' And when Elizabeth heard her voice, the baby in her womb *leaps* for joy.' And Elizabeth recognises that Mary's child was special. She exclaimed in a loud voice, 'Blessed are you among women and blessed is the fruit of your womb.' These words are now part of a Roman Catholic prayer, the 'Hail Mary'.

So here we have these two pregnant women: Elizabeth, who has experienced disgrace because of her 'barrenness', and Mary, in a rather dubious situation because although engaged, she was not yet married. These women were pregnant unexpectedly, and no doubt they were looking forward to becoming mothers, but their situations were not without complication.

And we who know the end of the story know that it was not a simple happy ending for them. Elizabeth's son, who grows up to become John the Baptist would end up being beheaded by Herod. And we know what happens to Mary's son. He died on a cross. So this Advent, even as we wait for the coming of the Christ child, our joy is tinged with poignancy.

Isn't it interesting that these two unlikely women, whom society held in disgrace were chosen by God to be key players in God's plan for salvation? That it is through these lowly and shamed ones that God has chosen to begin the transformation of the world? Women are so often overlooked or ignored, both in society at large and in biblical narrative, and yet here, they have the central role in this unfolding of God's plan.

Elizabeth speaks a prophetic word in this scene: she is filled with the Holy Spirit and proclaims what Mary has not yet told her, and what is not yet visible to the eye: that Mary is pregnant. Furthermore, through the Spirit, Elizabeth knows who Mary's child will be, for she calls Mary "the

mother of my Lord.” Her prophecy will later be fulfilled when her own son, John, prepares the way for the Lord.

Elizabeth not only prophesies but blesses. By declaring both Mary and the fruit of Mary’s womb “blessed” she begins a series of blessings that weave through Luke’s birth narrative and intensify its tone of joy, delight, and praise. Elizabeth recognizes that those who are privileged to be instruments of God’s saving work have been richly blessed.

Mary is blessed not only for her status as the mother of the Lord, but also for her trust in God’s promise. Elizabeth says, “Blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord” Mary is blessed because she has believed that God is able to do what God promises to do.

By greeting Mary with honour, Elizabeth overturns social expectations. Mary is an unmarried pregnant woman. She might expect social judgment, shame, even ostracism from her older kinswoman. Yet Elizabeth knows from her own experience the cost of being shamed and excluded. As an elderly infertile wife she had endured a lifetime of being treated as a failure.

Elizabeth continues the pattern of social reversal by opening her arms and her home to a relative whom her neighbours would expect her to reject. Instead of shaming Mary, she welcomes, blesses, and celebrates her, treating her as more honourable than herself. Thus the pregnancy that might have brought Mary shame brings joy and honour instead.

When Elizabeth welcomes Mary, she practices the same kind of inclusive love that Jesus will show to prostitutes and sinners. She sees beyond the shamefulness of Mary’s situation to the reality of God’s love at work even among those whom society rejects and excludes. Elizabeth’s words and actions invite us to reflect on our own openness to the ways that God chooses to act in our world. What is God doing today in our society through unexpected people and in unexpected ways?

Earlier we watched the video on Deb Roach and the Disability Pride movement. Deb was born with upper limb difference and growing she was ostracized in school and seen as ‘significantly less than’. Would you have thought that someone with her disability could have achieved so much? We might have expected that Deb’s disability might have diminished her somehow, but instead, she not only became a champion in her field but is using her platform to support the Disability Pride movement.

The reporter in the video, Elizabeth Wright, herself born with limb difference tells how in the US and UK, Disability Pride is celebrated with festivals and parades. In her interview with the Committee of Disability Pride Sydney, the interviewees expressed looking forward to the day when they don't have to explain what disability pride is, and also when people will view disability as a beautiful part of the range of human experience. Wouldn't that be a reversal of how things are in the present world, when the disability community are no longer ostracized and seen as 'less than' but celebrated and seen a beautiful part of humanity?

In our NT reading, Paul tells the community to be patient until the coming of the Lord. While we wait patiently, are we also on the lookout for signs of God's coming? Are we open to how God may work in surprising ways and through unexpected people to bring about the kingdom? Surely the disabled people in the video we have viewed are latter day prophets, working for and looking forward to a time when disabled people are treated with the dignity, and have their place in society and in God's kingdom?

Their stories and the stories of Elizabeth and Mary with their unexpected pregnancies shows us that God is able to work through the most unlikely of people and situations. And indeed, Mary in her song, often called the Magnificat sings of how God will do the unexpected, will turn the world upside down:

'He has brought down the powerful from their thrones  
and lifted up the lowly;  
he has filled the hungry with good things  
and sent the rich away empty.'

Mary speaks of these things as not as something that will happen in the future, but as already accomplished. Her trust in God is such that she speaks as though what God has promised has already come to pass. Indeed, in her own situation, it has already come to pass, for as she says, God has looked with favour on her lowly state, and chosen her as the one to bear this very special Child. And so she is able to sing with confidence: 'My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour.'

Our gospel reading tells us that Mary stayed with Elizabeth for 3 months. I wonder what that time was like? The older woman, with the wisdom of her years, the younger woman, with her strong faith. What was shared

by those 2 women in the months as they waited and anticipated the birth of their children?

Advent is also a time of waiting. We wait for the joy of the coming of Christ Child. The coming of Jesus in Bethlehem was a one-time, unique event that happened more than 2000 years ago. But these days, Christ's continued coming into the world is in the hands of people like us, we who are the body of Christ. Like Mary and Elizabeth, we also have the great blessing of being instruments of God's saving work.

May we, like Elizabeth and Mary, trust that God is coming to save and free us, to turn the world upside down. May we, like them, be a community that supports each other as we hope and wait. May we, like them, be open to how God may use us to bring the joy of Christmas into the world.