

Promises

“He has helped his servant Israel, remembering to be merciful to Abraham and his descendants forever, even as he said to our fathers”. Mary’s words here refer specifically to Israel, the descendants of Abraham as the ones who had received the promises.

Those promises had a wider scope – for he would be a light to the Gentiles. The fulfilling of those promises made to “our fathers” would bring light to the whole world – to all who would believe in his name, Jew and Gentile alike. The descendants of Abraham had received the promises and were waiting for the light to be revealed. Though centuries have passed, God hasn’t forgotten! He has kept his promise!

“Mary stayed with Elizabeth for about three months and then returned home”. This was about the time Elizabeth’s baby was due to be born. Did Mary stay for the birth of John? Reading it as it stands seems to suggest that she had gone home. There were good reasons for a person in Mary’s situation to depart before the crowd of neighbours and relatives started to gather. And it was important that Joseph formally marry Mary (as recorded in Mt. 1.24-25) before her pregnancy was becoming too obvious. She would not want to be too public before that.

So – what was she doing...? and where was she going...? Those were not questions for her. All were bound up in her initial commitment to be the humble servant of the Lord. Pregnancy can change a lot of plans and goals. It is a commitment that can cut right across some of the other things that seemed important to us...

Reflect:

- In what ways do our priorities change with our commitment to serve the Lord?
- “My soul glorifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour”. What are my specific reasons for glorifying the Lord and rejoicing? Let’s speak them out as part of our concluding praise.

Study 3: The Lord is Coming! Bible reading: Luke 1.67-80

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Four Studies for Advent
by Peter J Blackburn

2. My Soul Glorifies the Lord

Reading: Luke 1.39-56

We sometimes have an idea that Christmas time is different from any other time in the year and that we see the genuine “warm heart” of the community at this time. There is a measure of truth in that. Christmas is different and it does call out attitudes that lie hidden for the rest of the year. Perhaps it creates those attitudes.

Yet in other ways the Christmas magic that people seek is something of an illusion. At Christmas we express what we are within, in spite of the veneer of human kindness that is appropriate to the season.

There are three questions many people ask at Christmas time. The one that children often ask one another is “What are you getting for Christmas?” We try to make it all good by teaching that Christmas is giving time. But there is this deeply-entrenched expectation of getting that is so much part of our whole social fabric. “What’s in it for me?” is our basic concern – in economic terms, in relationships, whatever...

A second question is “What are you doing for Christmas?” Christmas, of course, is a holiday season. Our regular daily work isn’t really “doing” anything. It isn’t an integral part of what life is all about. A job has to be endured to earn the money for some “real” life.

A third question is “Where are you going this Christmas?” Hopefully our response reflects our commitment to home and family. It is a positive good that so many families endeavour to get together at Christmas time. This season ought to be a time when we evaluate the direction of our life. Far too often, the only consideration is the direction of our car.

Reflect:

- Getting... doing... going... To what extent do these three words express the Christmas expectations of many Australian families?
- Christmas will soon be upon us. What are we looking forward to this Christmas?

Elizabeth and Mary

Read: Luke 1.39-56

We can only imagine the time Elizabeth and Mary spent together. These two women – the one having conceived when well past childbearing years, the other having conceived as a virgin.

We have no idea, by the way, just how old Elizabeth and her husband were. They might have been in their late fifties or sixties – beyond the time when a childless couple would expect to have a baby, yet not so old that they might not survive to rear the child.

The attitudes underlying our three Christmas questions weren't in their thinking. "What will you get...?" Well, they each knew their child would be a boy. No ultrasound in those days! The angel Gabriel had brought that bit of information! But their attitude wasn't getting or grasping. For each of them, there would be a load as well as a joy in the bearing of their child. They were giving of themselves, and their gracious Lord was able to give to them – and to the world – through their availability for his will.

Listen to Elizabeth's greeting, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the child you will bear! But why am I so favoured, that the mother of my Lord should come to me?" Yes, what a privilege for Mary to be the mother of Jesus! And what a temptation to think of divine blessing and assumed status among women!

Yet that wasn't Mary's attitude. "My soul glorifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour, for he has been mindful of the humble state of his servant" She didn't see Elizabeth's words as exalting her above others. Rather, she was the Lord's humble servant – and also a sinner in need of her Son's work of salvation. "From now on all generations will call me blessed, for the Mighty One has done great things for me". Having humbled herself, having made herself available for the will of God, she was able to receive his great blessing and still know that it was his gift, not her assumed prerogative.

Reflect:

- Do we see a contrast between Elizabeth's greeting and Mary's response? To what aspects of God's action are each of them bearing witness?

God's Favour

What has happened to me, Mary is saying, simply demonstrates again God's character towards anyone who trusts him – "holy is his name. His mercy

extends to those who fear him, from generation to generation". What was happening to Mary was absolutely unique. But the principle of divine favour is the same towards all who believe.

God's favouritism is so very different from ours. In fact the Bible says many times that God has no favourites. We don't have status with God and we cannot buy status with God. But he shows mercy to those who honour him.

In God's way of dealing with people, there are some surprising reverses. The proud in their inmost thoughts are scattered. Rulers are brought down. The rich are sent away empty. But the humble are lifted up. The hungry are filled with good things.

Liberation Theology takes passages such as this and says that God has a preference for the poor. But that idea isn't really supported here or elsewhere. It misses the whole point. God has no favourites. It is not that he overturns our system of favouritism and prefers the poor instead! No! His mercy is shown to those who honour him. He lifts up the lowly. Both John the Baptist and Jesus began their ministries calling on people to "repent and believe the good news". So rich and poor alike are called to repent and believe the gospel. In practice, many of the rich and powerful are unwilling to do this.

God is no respecter of persons. He has no favourites. But he does choose people for particular tasks. He chose Abraham and his descendants to be the channel through which he would reveal himself and his purposes to the world. He chose the prophets to speak his message. He chose Mary to be the human mother of his own Son.

Reflect:

- In what ways does favouritism play a large part in modern society?
- What is the difference between favouritism and grace?