

SHARING THE WORLD OF WOMEN: 4TH SUNDAY ADVENT C

Luke today brings us into the world of women. One is Elizabeth, an older woman, who through the power of God is carrying a child who will be known as *'John the Baptist'*. The second woman is Mary, a teenager and the older woman's cousin. She too, through the power of the Holy Spirit, is carrying a child, who will be called *'Jesus'*, a name which means *'God saves'*. Luke stresses that although the two women see themselves as little, lowly and humble, in the mind and plan of God they are great and important. So we follow the details of their meeting with each other with much interest and listen carefully to their conversation.

It's important that Luke names the older woman *'Elizabeth'*, since many women in the bible are not named at all. They are referred to simply as *'mother'*, *'daughter'*, *'wife'* or *'woman'*. They are identified, in fact, only in relation to some man who is named. For example, we never learn the name of Peter's mother-in-law, whose sickness Jesus cured. She is just *'Peter's mother-in-law'*. In the bible, someone's name often tells us something important about the person. Elizabeth's name means *'God is my fullness, my completion'*. In the light of Luke's story about her, what an apt name that is!

The God in whom both Elizabeth and Mary delight, the God who has made them pregnant in a miraculous manner, is the God who delivers oppressed people from their pain and humiliation. This is the God who brought the Israelites out of slavery from Egypt and the exiles home from Babylon. This is the God whom Elizabeth thanks for removing her embarrassment about being infertile (1:25). This is the God whom Mary praises in her *Magnificat* for having *'looked with favour on the lowliness of his servant'* (1:48)

We find the two cousins meeting in Elizabeth's house in the little village of Ain Karin in the hills of Judaea. Pregnant women say they find comfort in being with one another, encouraging and supporting one another, sharing hopes and fears, and gaining practical information about the changes in their bodies. Elizabeth and Mary share their excitement about the babies they are carrying, but also about the plans and presence of God to them and their babies. They share their deep faith and trust in what God is doing.

Elizabeth becomes aware of God's presence at the very moment Mary comes through the door and starts to greet her cousin. Her child John leaps inside her womb. She remembers how as a child King David danced in the presence of God before the Ark of the Covenant. *'Filled with the Holy Spirit'* (1:41), she praises God and Mary's cooperation with God. In words which have passed into our *'Hail Mary'* prayer, she says to her: *'Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb'* (1:42) She recognises that Mary has kept on believing that God would keep his promises. Finally, she calls Mary's visit a special blessing to herself when she exclaims: *'Why should I be honoured with a visit from the mother of my Lord?'* (Lk 1:43)

While Luke makes clear that Elizabeth was not young, he does not imply that she was frail, feeble, doddering, demented or foolish. She is typical of the kind of senior women in our parishes, towns and suburbs, who are the backbone of our communities. They serve in the

sanctuary and work in the parish offices. They visit the sick. They teach and train the young. They pass on their wisdom to the next generation, as Elizabeth does in Luke's story.

Grandmothers and grandmother figures care for children when their parents are at work or otherwise absent. They listen with compassion to the stories of the needy, the humiliated, the hurt and the wounded. While they won't put up with any lies, hypocrisy or baloney, they are often the only ones who will greet us with a smile and take time to listen to our troubles. From their own rich life experiences, they offer perspective and balance. Thanks to their sense of humour they teach us not to take things too seriously, ourselves included. And isn't that a great gift from God?

The older women in our communities teach us not to be morbid or preoccupied with death, as they live in the present but with trust in the future. So often there is a special joy about them, the joy that comes from their trust in God, a joy that is infectious and energizing. We see that joy in the enthusiasm of the elderly Elizabeth in welcoming Mary to her home. We can imagine how encouraging that was for Mary, whose pregnancy was surely frightening and confusing for a very young single girl. Elizabeth reminds us of all those older women who mentor and support new mothers, including unmarried ones, who are there for abused women and their children, who befriend girls addicted to alcohol and drugs, who reach out to runaway and homeless children, and who help young women find jobs and learn new skills in the office and the home. Elizabeth reminds us too of all those older women, who have prayed all their lives, and who help younger ones interpret the Word and will of God. They are truly faith-friends to the rest of the parish.

To sum up! In the story of the visit of Mary to her cousin, Elizabeth too stands out as '*blessed among women*' for the role-model and inspiration she is for the senior women of our communities. They are at home with both God and us. They sustain us by their presence, their prayers, their sensitivity, their generosity, their wisdom and their love. We honour them this Christmas, and we pray that in the coming New Year they like Mary and Elizabeth will enjoy God's special favour for being the special people they are.

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