

North Balwyn Uniting Church,
Sunday 23 December 2012
Rev. Anneke Oppewal.
Reading: Luke 1: 39-56



“Cartwheels in the womb”

In this Sunday’s passage two women take centre stage: Mary and Elizabeth. Both find themselves to be pregnant unexpectedly, Mary the young and unmarried girl and Elizabeth the wife of Zechariah the priest, the elderly woman who’d longed for a child all her life but had given up hope of ever producing offspring.

Two women put in a situation that can’t have been easy for either of them. Unmarried and pregnant, too old to be pregnant, I am sure the village gossips were having a lovely time in both cases!

After Mary has received the message of the angel and accepted it with an open heart and open hands hurries over the hills of Judea to visit her relative Elizabeth.

We hear echoes here from that text from Isaiah 52 so wonderfully put to music in Handel’s Messiah: “How beautiful are the feet of those bearing good news.....” Mary the very first carrier of the good tidings of Christmas: the coming of the saviour.

As with Easter also with Christmas, according to Luke, it is the women who become the first heralds of the dawning of the New Age, the first witnesses, the first to see and believe, the first to proclaim the gospel.

Mary hurrying across the hills, burning with the news, seems hardly able to contain herself. As soon as she has received and accepted the promise given to her by the angel the story seems to accelerate. There is a lot of energy, movement and intense involvement evident.
We hear, and feel, the Holy Spirit move!

This is in marked contrast with the slow and very secondary reaction of Zechariah who, after the visit of the angel, first finishes his duties in the temple and then returns home at his leisure.

We are told the intensity and energy of Mary’s hurrying to Elizabeth with her message even reaches beyond ordinary boundaries: it causes the child in Elizabeth’s womb to leap at the sound of Mary’s greeting.

The Greek suggests Baby John is doing cartwheels for joy inside his mother’s tummy when Mary’s son gets near. Somehow what Jesus is, and will be, already communicating itself, even before his birth, even beyond the boundaries of ordinary communication. 1

And it puts John in a very special light too. Even in the womb it seems this prophet knows who his Lord is. Even in the womb, as the angel told his father, the Holy Spirit is upon him and the deeper truth of God is revealed to him.

Amazing and very powerful stuff which echoes the prologue of John's gospel where similar things are said with different words: Jesus the Word, with God from the beginning, God from the beginning.

Immediately after John is touched by the approach of his Lord, mother Elizabeth is also filled with the Holy Spirit. And it is hard to imagine how she would not be with the child jumping around for joy inside her.

"Blessed are you, and blessed the child you bear, who am I that the mother of my Lord comes to me....."

This is the turning upside down of the existing order and Luke will so fervently talk about it all through his gospel as one of the main consequences of Jesus' mission which starts here and now. The older bows to the younger, the first puts herself last, the Holy Spirit works and speaks through unborn babies, young girls and old women. With another prophecy fulfilled while they are at it.

The Greek word *egeneto*, a word that is used in Genesis 1 for each new deed of creation is used several times in the story. Suggesting that there is some major creating going on here, through these two women, in this leaping unborn child, inside the girl whose greeting calls the Holy Spirit into action in both the very young (how much younger can you get?) and the very old. A new creation has started, even before the last of the great prophets (John, the son of a priest and the daughter of a priest, with his camel coat, the locusts, his long hair, his unshaven face and the harsh and confronting words to his contemporaries) and the first of the new dawn (Jesus, turning everything upside down), have left the womb.

And Mary sings of that reversal, of the proud being scattered, of the mighty kings brought down from their thrones, and of the lifting up of the lowly, of the filling of the hungry with good things. A song so subversive and revolutionary that the Tsars apparently forbade it being sung in Church.

Mary proves herself a worthy mother for the Messiah, not only able to submit herself to God, but also able to stand up and speak words so strong they manage to frighten the mighty even centuries down the track.

A young, gentle and lovely girl, but also a powerful unyielding woman this Mary, most blessed of all women.

A very different reaction to that of Zechariah in whose doubts some of us may hear echoes of our own doubts: How can this come true? We're old, we're past it, there is nothing much that can be expected of us Kingdom wise. But Mary doesn't ask, nor does Elizabeth. Both embrace and accept the gift of God's grace and, quite literally, run with it. They lift their voices to join the

battle cry of a new and different world order: Lift up the lowly, fill the hungry, cast down the mighty!
While in the meantime the Holy Spirit is doing cartwheels in their tummies praising God's name.

Let it be a comfort that there is a place for all of them in the story, hesitating, slow moving, dumb struck Zechariah as well as the warm, gentle, elderly Elizabeth and the young and spirit-filled Mary who puts words to God's dreams deemed dangerous by the powerful on their thrones 20 centuries down the track. Luke tells us, in the magnificent opening to his gospel, that there is a place for those who thought their use by date has long since passed and for those who have only just been conceived. For the frail elderly, as well as for those of whom only an indication of existence has been felt by their mothers in the womb.
That all of us are, can be, part of that great recreating that is going on since Jesus came and showed us how. Amen.

The Magnificat....

***Sing out my soul,
sing of the holiness of God:
who was delighted in a woman,
lifted up the poor,
satisfied the hungry,
given voice to the silent,
grounded the oppressor,
blessed the full-bellied with emptiness,
and with the gift of tears
those who have never wept;
who has desired the darkness of the womb,
and inhabited our flesh.
Sing of the longing of God,
sing out, my soul.***

Picture: http://4.bp.blogspot.com/-Aq2yMa_aYmk/T8fkzuUY7MI/AAAAAAAAABkg/VDC5GeYOhRg/s1600/Visitati+on+2.jpg