

Sermon for Advent 4, Year C

The Text: Luke 1:39-45

Many of you in the coming days will spend time visiting friends and relatives or having friends and relatives visit you for various Christmas celebrations.

Some of you will play the part of host welcoming others into your homes. And as I talk you're probably running through the 100 things you still have to do, before your guests arrive. Being a host can be a busy or even a stressful task.

Others of you will be the guests this time around enjoying the hospitality of others, but that has its challenges too, packing travelling, managing time, perhaps attending multiple celebrations in multiple locations on the same day.

This is a special time of year to gather with loved ones and a blessing for those who are able to or have the opportunity to do so.

Today's text describes another family get together, a visit between relatives. In fact it is usually referred to on the Christian calendar as the visitation—when Mary, having discovered that she is pregnant, travelled to the hill country of Judea to the home of Zechariah and Elizabeth.

Elizabeth is pregnant with her son John at the time. What happens then as Mary enters the home of Zechariah and Elizabeth?

There is an outpouring of emotion and joy and blessing, there is blessing for the host, there is blessing for the guest, and there is blessing for the whole home as it welcomes Mary and Jesus into its midst. Let's think

about the hosts. First of all Zechariah and Elizabeth and little miniature John the Baptist about six months along at this stage.

They weren't spring chickens these two. Luke describes them as being well along in years. Elizabeth has finally been able to conceive but now Zechariah is unable to speak because he didn't believe the angel's words and that God was capable of giving them a child, so they have a few challenges to overcome. But all of that seems to pale in significance compared to the joy in their home and the good news she brings. *When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the baby leaped in her womb and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit* and later she says, "*Why am I so favoured that the mother of my Lord should come to me?*"

Elizabeth puts aside her challenges and distractions to simply rejoice and be grateful and express honour that such a special guest has come to her home. Elizabeth is excited, John the Baptist in the womb is excited. We're not sure what Zechariah is because he can't talk but we assume he is excited too that Mary, who Elizabeth calls *the mother of her Lord*, has come to stay.

Elizabeth recognises by the power of the Holy Spirit the miracle of what's going on here. God hasn't just entered the world but God has entered the womb. God has become embryonic, the infinite finite, the immortal mortal, the invulnerable vulnerable, the supernatural natural, the creator has entered his creation and the impossible has become possible.

This is the visit of our Lord into his world. We get so distracted by externals at Christmas time, by presents, by preparations, by food and drink and being a good host or a good guest. Elizabeth draws our attention to what is internal to her inner joy at Mary's inner child. Being a good host isn't easy. Do you know how long Mary stayed with Zechariah and Elizabeth? Three months. Do you know how long your relatives are planning to stay with you after Christmas? You better find out!

Mary was there three months, probably right up to the birth of John, but no doubt this time spent together involved great joy and blessing for them all. So what about Mary?

As she travelled from Nazareth to Judea some 130 km away, there may have been the questions: what if they didn't accept her? Believe her? Want her there? What if they didn't make her feel at home? Often the anticipation of visiting, the uncertainty of visiting, can be one of the hardest parts, but once in the presence of her kinsfolk, once Mary arrives at her destination, all of that subsides. Elizabeth's first words are words of welcome and words of blessing. *"Blessed are you among women and blessed is the child you will bear!"*. And later Mary also sings *"From now on all generations will call me blessed"*.

To be blessed is to be a recipient of God's goodness and grace. The word blessing literally means a good word. So when Elizabeth blesses Mary and describes her as being blessed, what she is saying is that God has spoken a good word to her, and begun a good work in her that he has entrusted something good to her.

From the angel's message, to Joseph's faithfulness, to Mary's willingness, to Jesus' presence, it all sounds to Elizabeth like good words, blessings, words of joy, words that speak of God's goodness, and Elizabeth recognises then the source of blessing not simply above her or beyond her, but right in front of her. *"Blessed is the child you will bear!"*

God's good word has entered our world, God's good word, to overcome the many bad words of this world. God's good word of forgiveness and healing and hope. To overcome the bad words, of conflict and gossip and anger, that all too often cross our lips.

There is blessing for the host, there is blessing for the guest and finally there is blessing for every home that welcomes him. Elizabeth says *as soon as the sound of your greeting reached my ears the baby in my womb leaped for joy*

Blessed is she who has believed that the Lord would fulfil his promises to her!"

John the Baptist leaped in the womb, he can't contain his joy in the presence of his cousin Jesus. John the Baptist is bouncing for joy in his

mother's womb at the presence of his cousin but also his Lord—he would later say: “The one who comes after me ranks ahead of me.”

And Elizabeth announces once final blessing on Mary for her faith that God would do exactly what he said he would do, and send his Saviour for her and within her. This is the best blessing, not material wealth, not worldly success, not even physical safety and security and prosperity. Beautiful Mary and-Elizabeth-like faith at the coming of Jesus into their homes, a good word and work from God.

So what will fill your home this Christmas? People perhaps? Maybe even for longer than you expected! Presents maybe? Good food, good drink, the smell of ham and honey biscuits. That's all good stuff but it's not the only stuff.

We have a responsibility and a privilege and a joy to keep before our hosts and before our guests and within our homes. But the most important word and work of all is from the one who is our guest, our host, and our Lord...and the presence for every home this Christmas. Amen.