

Luke 1:39-45

What comes to mind when we think of Christmas? Our thoughts change as we grow older, but when I was young, it was the anticipation of spending Christmas Day at my grandparents' home along with my parents, brothers, sisters, uncles, aunts and other relations. But the greatest anticipation was for that present or gift, that I had hinted about, at every conceivable opportunity, since about the preceding October, if not before. Then came Christmas Eve with all its wonder, excitement and anticipation.

No doubt there was extreme anticipation on Mary's part as she started on her journey to Elizabeth's house. She was to be given the greatest gift of all. The gift of being the mother of the Son of God.

What had happened to Mary, when she had been told that she was to become the mother of the Son of God, must have passed all understanding. It must have been an earth shattering event as far as she was concerned. Here she was, betrothed but not yet married to Joseph, and she is told that she is to have a baby - no ordinary baby, but a baby who is the Son of God and is to be named Jesus. In the verse before this morning's Gospel reading, she unreservedly put her whole trust in God and said to the angel Gabriel who had broken this news to her *"Here am I, the servant of the Lord, let it be with me according to your word."*

In Mary we have a person whose faith in God was tremendous. God was able to use her to bring about the greatest event in world history, the birth of Jesus on that first Christmas Day. As we prepare for Christmas it is worth thinking about Mary's visit to Elizabeth

First of all we heard in our Gospel reading Luke chapter 1 verses 39 and 40 two short sentences to describe a fairly long journey of some sixty miles or more. When you look at a map of the area in New Testament Times you can see what a distance she must have covered from Nazareth, journeying south to the hill country of Judea. Apparently no one has been able to pin point exactly where Elizabeth and Zechariah lived, but it must have taken at least two days. Where did she stay overnight and who accompanied her? We are not told, but we know that she must have had a very good reason for such a long trek.

The Bible does not explain why she went, but there are some very strong pointers. Mary was very young and the news given to her by an angel that she was to have a child would have stretched her faith and her emotions to the limit. She would have had great joy that she had been chosen to be the mother of the son of God, but grave apprehension about what the neighbours would think and say. Worst of all, how would Joseph, to whom she was engaged, react? Who would ever believe her account of what she had been told by the angel? Also she might have started to wonder whether all this had really happened or had she dreamt it. God knew that her faith had to be bolstered and strengthened. The angel had told her all about Elizabeth and that even though she was very old she was now six months pregnant, adding *"For there is nothing that God cannot do."* Mary would have realised that Elizabeth, the mother to be of John the Baptist, was probably the only person who would really believe her story and at the same time confirm the wonderful message that she had herself received from God. We know that Mary never for one moment doubted, but it must have been a great strength for her to have this older relative giving her such support and confirmation of her faith..

There are times when we can find a great strengthening in our Christian lives through the support of other Christians. We need to remember that we too can do the same for others.

If our Gospel reading had continued for another few verses we would have heard Mary bursting into song, that wonderful song that we know as the Magnificat. She immediately starts with words of praise *"My soul magnifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour."* She is so full of praise and joy. She is bubbling over with it. Yet in all this her humility shines through. Although the underlying reason for her praise and joy is that she is to be the mother of Jesus, this does not come into her song. Her joy arises because, in acting as he is towards her, God is acting as her

Saviour. She gives thanks because he has remembered her, his lowly servant. Later generations were to exalt her, but she herself focuses completely on God and the mighty things that he has done for her and for those who have been largely ignored by the rest of society, those who are hungry and those who are lowly. There is much that we can learn from Mary's attitude and the way that the great honour bestowed on her did not affect her character. Her praise was for God and God alone

Will we this Christmas, in the midst of our festivities, like Mary, focus on God and thank him for what he has done for us? Will we also keep in mind those who are not so fortunate as ourselves?

The overriding attribute that Mary had was Peace in her life, something that is often missing in the lives of many people. But Mary had peace in her heart, the peace of faithfully and willingly doing what God wanted of her. She was to bring into the world God's Son who would be the prince of Peace. He would come to preach the Good News of peace to all. His gift to every Christian would be peace with God, and peace with our fellow human beings. This peace is a peace of heart and mind unaffected by circumstances. *'Peace,' he told his disciples on his last evening with them, 'is what I leave with you; it is my own peace that I give you. I do not give it as the world does. Do not be worried and upset; do not be afraid.'*

We may wonder how we can possibly have peace in our present day world, with the Omicron variant of the virus spreading so quickly, millions of people displaced and so many in need of the basic necessities for life.

Mary always put her whole trust in God, so can we. Our troubles and anxieties may not disappear but we shall have God's peace in our hearts.

Mary had a wonderful faith in God and she was full of praise for him. She had that peace, which carried her through all her troubles and difficulties. We too can have the Peace that Jesus offers us. In this season of Peace and Goodwill to all, may the peace of God, that surpasses all human understanding, be with each one of us with Jesus at the centre of our lives. AMEN.