

# Hope Beyond Queasiness

Pitt Street Uniting Church, Sunday 28 November 2021

A Reflection by Rev Dr Josephine Inkpin

Advent C

**Contemporary Reading: *Annunciation*, by Denise Levertov; Luke 1:26-45**

This worship service can be viewed on You Tube at <https://pittstreetuniting.org.au/spirit/reflections/>

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How do you relate to Mary in our Christian tradition? Even mentioning her name opens up a host of feelings and thoughts for so many. As the Danish literary historian Pil Dahlerup rightly said, in an article entitled 'Rejoice, Mary':

*No woman and no deity in the Middle Ages attracted the poets like the Virgin Mary, mother of Christ. It is, however, hard to read what the poets write about Mary; we are inhibited by prejudices that block our understanding of what the texts are actually saying. Protestants dislike her because she is attributed divinity. Male chauvinists dislike her because she is a woman. Feminists dislike her because she is a woman in a way of which they disapprove. Nationalists dislike her because she represents an alien element in terms of creed and idiom. Marxists dislike her because they do not see her (in the North) as a figure of the people...<sup>1</sup>*

Despite this, we cannot avoid Mary in Christian faith. Not least, although women and their lives and gifts are so few and highly gendered in the Bible, Mary simply cannot be erased. So what do we make of her today?

I ask that question because I believe Mary was originally a huge challenge to religious and political conservatives; because, as Pil Dahlerup says, Mary has also been a source of liberation, even a revolutionary inspiration, particularly in parts of the world's South; and because, in my view, we badly need to reclaim Mary as part of a life, not death-centred, spirituality for today.

Life and Death, like light and darkness, and other polarities, they can be posed as simplistic binary alternatives. In reality however, they are intertwined, as the biblical Mary and Jesus stories witness, and our own lives attest. We cannot view Christmas for example without awareness of Holy Week and Easter. Life and Death - and New Life - are part of the whole story of Mary and Jesus. Yet have we perhaps allowed Death far too much attention in the balance of that story?

I ask that question too because I am wearied sometimes at the way many Christians approach Advent - this liturgical season before Christmas. Our Churches, in my view, typically give far too much airplay to themes of death, judgement, ancient prophecy, and - frankly - old, and in the case of John the Baptist somewhat cranky, doom-laden, men.

And worst of all, we often hear and see the awful refrain '*Jesus came... to die.*'

Now I know there is value in some of those 'traditional' Advent themes. But is the heart of the Christian message - especially at Christmas - really that Jesus 'came to die'?

Isn't the far greater truth that Jesus came to live, and to help us find life? And isn't the heart of the message of Advent and Christmas most truly spiritual and actual pregnancy and birth - especially in the bodies and voices of women, among whom Mary and Elizabeth stand most prominently?

This is why - at least for this year - we have reshaped our lectionary readings, and liturgical emphases, for this Advent. For surely it is not death we need to ponder at this time, particularly in a continuing pandemic, so much as it is affirming the seeds and flowerings of life.

We need to celebrate the generation and nurture of new life, the promise of birth, borne by other-than-male bodies long ago, and the generation, nurture and promise of new life, and birth, right now among us, in all kinds of bodies. For the core of Advent is surely that, like Jesus, we are not so much born for death as we are born for life and to bring new life to others. All of which brings us back to the centrality of Mary, and today, Elizabeth.

What is God saying to us in Mary today? Earlier we heard Denise Levertov's wonderful poem *Annunciation* which encourages us to look at Mary afresh, and to rediscover more life in her - including the gifts of extraordinary courage and her own will and active consent to bearing love. So what do we want to add to that poem? And what do we see of ourselves in our Gospel reading today? To pick up one great Advent theme we centre on today, where do we find and nurture hope?

Finding hope is a great challenge to many people today, isn't it? The pandemic has certainly revealed the huge disparities of power and wealth in our world, and the pressing issues of climate crisis, global poverty, and violence of various kinds, have, if anything, worsened. Meanwhile, as we have been rudely reminded this week, for sexually and gender diverse people in Australia, there is still no relief from the continuing backlash after the marriage equality advance. Where then do we find hope?

I want to offer some ways forward, beginning with some reflections on Mary and Elizabeth in Luke chapter 1, and I invite us to develop them further in the next few weeks.

If we are to find authentic hope in our lives and world today we certainly have to be prepared to walk in the darkness of not always knowing where we are going. For, as we see repeatedly in the Bible, authentic faith and true love are found in letting go into the mystery of God. Hope in our darkness comes from God. It is divine light which will transform our lives and world, not our poor human imitations or substitutions. How and where we look for hope, determines whether we find it.

This brings me to the wonderfully rich story of hope in Luke chapter 1. This ends dramatically with Zechariah's great prophecy that God's promise in Isaiah will be fulfilled, and that, in the work of John the baptiser, hope and light will begin to break through the darkness. We look at that again, with the story of Joseph, in a couple of weeks. However, the story of Mary and Elizabeth is really the central aspect of this chapter. For it is a striking example of how, as elsewhere in the Bible, the experience of the marginalised is the vehicle of hope. In this case, the marginalised are two women in the ancient world, whose experiences are typically dominated by men.

Sadly, the Bible has too few of such female stories and voices upfront. Here, in Luke chapter 1 however, male voices are silent – literally so, in the case of Zechariah until Elizabeth’s child is born. For it is in the wombs and lives of the two women, lowly though they may be - one really too young and the other really too old - that divine hope is born.

Mary and Elizabeth embrace one another in this story, and in doing so they reveal the nature of God’s embrace. What matters is not their age, nor their gender, nor sexual expectations – for however you read the story of Jesus’ birth, as literally and/or symbolically from a virgin, it is most decidedly queer, in so very many different aspects. So too here, it is the loving embrace of two women, two marginalised women, which, so to speak, subverts the story of Israel. The power and voices of others rule their lives in so many ways. Yet here, out of the glaring light of patriarchy and colonisation, a different light and a different voice is stirring.

As the Lutheran pastor Heidi Neumark has highlighted<sup>ii</sup>, the story of the Visitation of Mary to Elizabeth is full of wonderful literal and spiritual meaning when viewed through the eyes of women. Take the references to periods of three months for example. These are easily passed over, and usually are by male bible scholars, even though times in the Gospels typically have significant import. In this case, they surely refer to trimesters of pregnancy. Mary visits her cousin in the 6th month of Elizabeth’s pregnancy and for the first 3 months of her own.

So why did she stay so long? Might it be that the first trimester of pregnancy is typically the most vulnerable, and Mary might also have been particularly prone to morning sickness at that time? For what this passage involves is a profound time of nurturing new life out of darkness and uncertainty, involving great hormonal changes and coming to terms with other shifts and sufferings.

Heidi Neumark also points out that the Spanish word for morning sickness is ‘*malabarriga*’, sometimes translated as ‘evil belly’. Mary’s great cry of liberation – the Magnificat – thus emerges out of these months of *malabarriga*, at a time when there was tremendous upheaval in both her own body and that of the wider social body of which she was a part. Let us never forget Mary’s dubious reputation in some quarters. When we put this alongside Roman repression, and Herod’s tyrannical behaviour, this was indeed a time when finding hope and God’s light seemed very difficult. Herod alone, as Heidi Neumark powerfully expresses it, was ‘*a disturbed personality who put the vulnerable in peril. It was... enough to give anyone a bad case of malabarriga.*’

It is my sense that what the world and the universal Church is experiencing right now can be similarly likened to a very bad case of *malabarriga*. Huge hormonal changes are going on. The body of Christ, like the body of society and the body of the planet we share, is struggling to cope. Feeling sick is therefore inevitable, at least at times. Feeling sick is also generally a sign of something being wrong, which is why it is easy for some to reject the birthing process. Yet, if there is discomfort, our story proclaims, it is because it is also a liminal time, pregnant with new life and hope.

Do you have a womb? Biologically speaking, I don’t. Almost all cisgender women do, and, of course, some trans men and non-binary people – another mysterious queer reality with which the world is still gradually coming to terms. Tragically, too many womb bearers are also unable to bear children, even though they long to do so. We assuredly need to hold them close in our hearts at this time. That, and the loss of a child or the prospect of a child, at any age, is devastating.

Yet, even when we suffer devastation, all of us have the capacity to bear God in some way: to bring to birth God's love in ourselves. This is the heart of the story of the Visitation. Like Mary and Elizabeth, whether we are young or old, full of hope or full of shame, weak or strong, naïve or battered by the world – and whether we are feminine or masculine, or someone making sense of or beyond both – we can share in bringing forth love from God's infinite womb of creativity.

Indeed, as you may know, one of the most important ancient names for Mary is, in Greek, *theotokos*, which means 'god-bearer'. That is what we are all called to be, inspired by Mary and Elizabeth: we are called to be *theotokoi*, god-bearers, love-bearers, hope-bearers.

It can be a queasy journey, an uncertain journey. Mary and Elizabeth could have said 'no' and denied their callings and capacities to bear hope: denying what they truly were. Yet they did not. Mary and Elizabeth show us that bearing God – bringing to birth what we truly are – is a work of prayer, of courage, of grace. And of mutual support.

Like Elizabeth and Mary, we can all be supports on to one another on that journey, and to others. We can all be bearers of hope.

What is required is that, like Mary and Elizabeth, we also have the courage to receive joyfully the gifts we are offered and which can be birthed in us, even in our own trying circumstances.

We, like Jesus, are not so much born to die, as we are born to live, in which death is but a part.

Let us then share in Mary and Elizabeth's ability to say 'Yes': Yes to divine life, and the hope and love it brings to us and others, whatever the darkneses with which we may continue to struggle.

In the name of the Christ child in us all,

Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> <https://nordicwomensliterature.net/2011/02/14/rejoice-mary/>

<sup>ii</sup> <https://www.christiancentury.org/blog-post/guest-post/seeing-myself-story-feast-visitation>