

Dear Friends,

Luke 1: 26-28

Luke's gospel begins with two contrasting stories. Last week we looked at the first of them. That took us to the sanctuary in the temple in Jerusalem. In the minds of Israelite people, there wasn't a more important place than the sanctuary anywhere. By contrast, the second story, which is our focus for this week, takes us to Nazareth, a town in the north. This was a place which, probably unfairly, had been given a bad reputation. Some despised it and said things like "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" So, we are moving from a place considered by all to be of great value, to one thought by some to be of little value.

In the first story we met Elizabeth and Zechariah. They were described as righteous and blameless. They kept all God's commandments and regulations. They were also people in need. They wanted to have a child. In the story their need was met. The angel Gabriel told Zechariah that they would have a baby. That baby became John the Baptist who prepared the way for Jesus.

This week in contrast to venerable Elizabeth and Zechariah we meet Mary. She is not described as being good or religious. She is just a young girl, probably between about 12 and 15 years of age. That was the typical age for betrothal at the time. She has been given in marriage to Joseph. That's been settled. The agreement cannot be broken except in the most extreme circumstances. However, the couple do not yet live together. Mary is spending one last year with her own family, before she moves to Joseph's home. Then the marriage will be consummated and made official. Unlike Elizabeth and Zechariah, she is not in need. She is particularly not in need of having a child. She has many years ahead of her when, all being well, that will be possible.

From the sanctuary in Jerusalem to Nazareth; from Elizabeth and Zechariah to Mary. You might think that we've moved from the main event to a sub plot. Surely the important stuff is going to happen around Elizabeth and Zechariah not Mary. But maybe not.

As the angel Gabriel appeared to Zechariah, now he appears to Mary. He met Zechariah in the sanctuary. That could have been expected. The sanctuary was surely home territory for an angel. But he may have had to make special travel arrangements to get to the wilds of Nazareth. And that may be a clue that something special is happening with Mary. It's as though Zechariah goes to Gabriel, but Gabriel makes the effort to go to Mary.

There's also something special about the way that Gabriel greets Mary. He says "Rejoice, highly favoured one." The idea is not that she deserves to be called "highly favoured". This favour is a totally unmerited, free, gift. Gabriel goes on "The Lord is with you". In the Jewish scriptures two kinds of people have often been addressed with these words, prophets, and warriors. Is Mary to be a bit of a prophet? Is Mary to be a bit of a warrior?

Luke, in his writings, is certainly keen to introduce us to women who are prophets. When Jesus is still a baby, he meets Anna. She is eighty-four years old and a prophet. Then in "The Acts of the Apostles", Luke's follow up to his gospel, we will read this promise, "Your sons and your daughters shall prophesy." And in that book, we will also read about Philip who had four daughters who were all prophets. I think Mary could be the first in this line of women prophets. In this story she receives a prophet's greeting and later we will hear some of her words which have more than a trace of the prophetic about them.

And what about a warrior? She is certainly going to need some strength and resilience to get through all that lies ahead. After the birth of Jesus, Simeon, an elderly man, will give her a warning. He will say "A sword will pierce your own soul". It's an ominous thing to say to a new mother. She is being told that she will receive a warrior's wound.

That lies ahead. For now, we wait to see how Mary will feel in the presence of an angel, how she will respond to his strange greeting.

God bless you,

Tony