

## Fourth Sunday in Advent- Year C

Micah 5.2-5a and Luke 1.39-45

In this season of stories, I want to begin by reminding you of the Hans Christian Andersen tale about the Emperor's New Clothes. An Emperor loved his clothes, he loved them much more than he loved the affairs of state. He had many rooms full of clothes. One day 2 strangers came to town and they said they would make him a new suit. This would be made of the finest cloth and be exquisitely tailored. But much more than that, the cloth was so fine that anyone who was stupid or unfit for office would not be able to see it. The Emperor was delighted and asked the strangers to start straight away. They went to a room in the palace and set up some looms and pretended to weave their cloth. Eventually the Emperor came along for a fitting and didn't dare say he couldn't see anything, as that would reveal him to be foolish. So, he pretended to try on the suit and exclaimed how lovely it was. Once the suit was declared finished, as arranged he went out in a grand procession to show it off to the crowd, and they too all pretended that it was wonderful, marvelous and beautiful. Then one little boy said, he hasn't got anything on at which point everybody stopped pretending and then they laughed at the Emperor.

As ever with stories there is much that we could reflect on but not all of it is relevant to today. I want to draw out 2 points. One is that a word of truth was spoken and the second point is that this wisdom came from an unexpected source.

The gospel reading today tells us the story of Mary visiting Elizabeth just after the Annunciation. The Angel Gabriel has told Mary that she has found favour with God and is about to become pregnant and will bear a son who she will name Jesus. Mary rushes off to visit her cousin Elizabeth. A young girl is seeking comfort from an older woman after receiving some daunting and overwhelming news. Elizabeth is married to a priest called Zechariah and she is a respectable woman and even more so now that she is finally going to have a child and so the shame of her barrenness is about to be removed. This makes Elizabeth a very suitable person to turn to for help. Perhaps she had a reputation for being comforting, for being discreet and for knowing just what to do. As Mary arrives, Elizabeth is herself filled with the Holy Spirit and she declares her understanding and astonishment at what is happening.

A word of truth is spoken. But the wisdom is not in Elizabeth, the respectable carer but in Mary whom Elizabeth declares is blessed because in Luke's words, she believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord. The person who bears Christ is the one who is seeking help rather than the one who is giving it.

In his book on Icons of Mary called 'Ponder these things' Rowan Williams reflects on an icon called The Virgin of the Signs, the Orans. In it Mary is seen with her hands held out and on her breast is a medallion of Christ. This is usually taken to be a symbol of the Church with Christ hidden in its midst praying. Williams comments, 'But if we think of the essential hiddenness that the image reminds us of, we must not suppose that being aware of that presence will necessarily make it easier for us to pin down where it is. ..What if the life that fuels the Church through prayer is not the routine prayer of the worshipping community,...but moments of exposure and insight, or of desperately needy openness to God on the part of very irregular Christians? Isn't this what Jesus' story of the Pharisee and the tax collector might suggest? What if the Church really lives from the prayer and experience of those it least values in its public talk? ("Ponder these things" Rowan Williams p48)

This may be a slightly uncomfortable thought but it connects with Hebrew tradition that identifies the 'anawim' or the poor, as being of special importance. Maria Boulding in her Advent book comments that, 'The cry of the poor is the purest and truest voice in the chorus of prayer

that articulated Israel's longing for God... They were the have-nots, the underprivileged, the powerless, the people whose economic poverty drove them to unlimited trust in God.' (The Coming of God Maria Boulding p21)

Boulding says that the anawim, are of special significance because they have been pressurized by disappointment and that their very misery has forced their hearts open to God. Mary is, in Boulding's words, 'the fine flower of the 'anawim' tradition, who summed up in her own faith and availability to God the purest and strongest expectation of Israel. (p23)

The conclusion we may draw from this and the message that comes out of today's gospel is that being with the poor and marginalized is not just an optional extra of our faith practice, it is an integral part of it if we wish to seek Christ. In recent weeks we as a church community have put a great deal of effort into hospitality for resettled families from the Middle east by hosting a Christmas party and in welcoming in the community to sing Carols. People have given a huge amount of help to the Foodbank and cooked meals for the Robes project. I want to suggest that whilst this undoubtedly helps those we care for, it is also transformative for us as a faith community.

Ann Morisy says, 'Our routine assumption is that those who are chronically poor and dispossessed are in deficit, both spiritually and materially, whilst those who respond to their needs are more materially secure and live confidently within the providential nature of God....it maybe that the secure are likely to receive most from an encounter with the poor and the marginalized.' (Beyond the Good Samaritan Morisy P7.)

In today's gospel reading Mary turned to Elizabeth for comfort, but it was Mary who bore Christ. Is it possible that in ministering to others we draw closer to an encounter with Christ for ourselves? Morisy believes this is so and says, 'The struggle of the poor and dispossessed can open the eyes and hearts of those whose own lives have been protected from such assaults and enable them to see and understand the radical kingdom reversals which are at the heart of the gospel.'(p8)

Working as a mental health chaplain has profoundly transformed my faith as I have so often found myself encountering Christ in surprising places. One of my last meetings was with Carol who had drawn me a picture which she had put into a frame she'd reclaimed from a skip which someone else had thrown away. I'd known Carol for at least 15 years. I knew she often sat beside a homeless person whom she befriended under a bridge in Balham. She would treat him to a lunch once a week at a local café and give short shrift to the café owner's protestations. As we said goodbye, she asked if she could pray for me and then thanked God that I had rescued her from a skip and recycled her. She had enormous resilience and courage and had been so dignified in a life of real difficulty. She may have turned to me for comfort but in her endurance and overcoming I encountered Christ. We were both transformed, even recycled by the experience.

Today's gospel reading continues on into the song we know as the Magnificat where Mary exults in God because he has looked with favour on her lowliness and is ushering in a kingdom of radical reversal. We too may exult in this for our faith community is being strengthened and deepened by both our prayers and our activity for when these are integrated our life is truly transformed. As Rowan Williams says about the Icon of the Virgin of the Signs, 'Hands open to God, eyes open to the world; and within, the hidden energy that soaks the Church with divine action, divine love.(p55)

May this continue to come to birth in us as we recognize Christ in others.  
Amen.

