

THE ASSUMPTION

Luke 1:39-56

Blessed is she who believed

Luke 1:39 In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country, 40 where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. 41 When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit 42 and exclaimed with a loud cry, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. 43 And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me? 44 For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leaped for joy. 45 And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfilment of what was spoken to her by the Lord."

46 And Mary said, "My soul magnifies the Lord, 47 and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour, 48 for he has looked with favour on the lowliness of his servant. Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed; 49 for the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name. 50 His mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation. 51 He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. 52 He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; 53 he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty. 54 He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy, 55 according to the promise he made to our ancestors, to Abraham and to his descendants forever."

Luke 1:56 And Mary remained with her about three months and then returned to her home.

INITIAL OBSERVATIONS

The birth stories have a different, more symbolic-theological quality to the rest of the Gospel narrative. Here the meeting of cousins leads to a great hymn, rather political and revolutionary in tone and substance.

OLD TESTAMENT BACKGROUND

Hannah prayed and said, "My heart exults in the Lord; my strength is exalted in my God. My mouth derides my enemies, because I rejoice in my victory. There is no Holy One like the Lord, no one besides you; there is no Rock like our God. Talk no more so very proudly, let not arrogance come from your mouth; for the Lord is a God of knowledge, and by his actions are weighed. The bows of the mighty are broken, but the feeble gird on strength. Those who were full have hired themselves out for bread, but those who were hungry are fat with spoil. The barren has borne seven, but she who has many children is forlorn. The Lord kills and brings to life; he brings down to Sheol and raises up. The Lord makes poor and makes rich; he brings low, he also exalts. He raises up the poor from the dust; he lifts the needy from the ash heap, to make them sit with princes and inherit a seat of honour. For the pillars of the earth are the Lord's, and on them he has set the world. "He will guard the feet of his faithful ones, but the wicked shall be cut off in darkness; for not by might does one prevail. The Lord! His adversaries shall be shattered; the Most High will thunder in heaven. The Lord will judge the ends of the earth; he will give strength to his king, and exalt the power of his anointed." (1 Samuel 2:1-10)

KIND OF WRITING

The meeting of the cousins forms part of the structure of Luke 1-2, in the following scheme: (the canticles are named in italics). The Magnificat is thought to come from the prayers of early Jewish

Annunciation of the birth of John	1:5-25
Annunciation of the birth of Jesus	1:26-38
Visitation of Mary to Elizabeth	1:39-56 The <i>Magnificat</i>
The birth of John	1:57-80 The <i>Benedictus</i>
The birth of Jesus	2:1-21 The <i>Gloria</i>
Presentation in the Temple	2:22-40 The <i>Nunc Dimittis</i>

Thought for the day

While we are used to thinking of Mary as enjoying exceptional privileges as a human being, on this day what happened to her, being in God's presence as a whole human being, prefigures our future as well. So this is a feast which looks backwards to the grace Mary enjoyed, but also forward to our own future in God's presence. There we too, we believe, will stand before God with all the saints, fully present to God. Even if we cannot really picture such a future, we believe nevertheless in a God who loves all that we are, our bodies, our relationships, our history, our engagement in the real world.

Prayer

Today, creator and redeemer God, we rejoice! We look forward to our sharing in those gifts in the world to come, when we will stand in your presence with all the saints.

Christians, who experienced real deprivation and who put their hope in God. It conforms to the three-fold pattern of hymns of praise:

- An introduction praising God (vv. 46b-47)
- The body of the hymn (vv. 48-53)
- A conclusion (vv. 54-55)

NEW TESTAMENT FOREGROUND

Now the whole group of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one claimed private ownership of any possessions, but everything they owned was held in common. With great power the apostles gave their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus,

and great grace was upon them all. There was not a needy person among them, for as many as owned

lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold. They laid it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need. There was a Levite, a native of Cyprus, Joseph, to whom the apostles gave the name Barnabas (which means "son of encouragement"). He sold a field that belonged to him, then brought the money, and laid it at the apostles' feet. (Acts 4:32–37)

ST PAUL

I do not say this as a command, but I am testing the genuineness of your love against the earnestness of others. For you know the generous act of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich. And in this matter I am giving my advice: it is appropriate for you who began last year not only to do something but even to desire to do something—now finish doing it, so that your eagerness may be matched by completing it according to your means. For if the eagerness is there, the gift is acceptable according to what one has—not according to what one does not have. I do not mean that there should be relief for others and pressure on you, but it is a question of a fair balance between your present abundance and their need, so that their abundance may be for your need, in order that there may be a fair balance. As it is written, "The one who had much did not have too much, and the one who had little did not have too little." (2Corinthians 8:8–15)

But you are not in the flesh; you are in the Spirit, since the Spirit of God dwells in you. Anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him. But if Christ is in you, though the body is dead because of sin, the Spirit is life because of righteousness. If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies also through his Spirit that dwells in you. (Romans 8:9–11)

BRIEF COMMENTARY

Verse 39 Following the angel's revelation, Mary visits Elizabeth.

Verse 40 Zechariah is actually absent, although he received the annunciation.

Verse 41 In Luke-Acts, it is the Holy Spirit who inspires and moves. The leaping of the child is a miraculous acknowledgement of the superiority of Jesus.

Verse 43 A beatitude.

Verse 43 A post-resurrection confession of faith in Jesus as Lord.

Verse 44 Joy is typical of Luke—no mere happiness, but end-time joy at salvation.

Verse 45 Another beatitude, portraying Mary as a model believer.

Verse 46 The phrase echoes Hannah's hymn (cf. Ps 69:31; 35:9). The second line moves from praise to joy, a Lucan theme.

Verse 47 Hannah is one of the poor one (the *anawim*) because of her infertility. This may reflect the actual condition of the first generations of disciples as well. "From now on" signals the new time of salvation inaugurated by Jesus. Blessed = a beatitude.

Verse 48 The "great things" are the deeds of salvation in the past now completed in Jesus' death and resurrection. Cf. Act 2:11. God as mighty—cf. Luke 18:27. That God's name is holy is widely attested. Cf. Is 57:15.

Verse 49 An echo of: *But the steadfast love of the Lord is from everlasting to everlasting on those who fear him, and his righteousness to children's children.* (Psalm 103:17). Mercy is the covenant quality of God found for example in Exodus 34:6. Mary is shown praising God's greatness, might, holiness and mercy.

Verse 50 The allusion is to Ps 89:11. The first part of the verse shows the action of God and the second part the result. Conceit means also plotting / scheming. In the bible, the proud look down on others because they do not look up to God and are therefore always God's enemies. Heart = mind in Semitic anthropology.

Verse 51 Notice the parallelism (antithetic). There is a play on words, the mighty are put down by the one who is Mighty.

Verse 52 Reversal of fortune is the hope of those who put their trust in God. Cf. Luke 20:10-11.

Verse 53 Cf. But you, Israel, my servant, Jacob, whom I have chosen, the offspring of Abraham, my friend; you whom I took from the ends of the earth, and called from its farthest corners, saying to you, "You are my servant, I have chosen you and not cast you off". (Isaiah 41:8–9) Cf. Ps 98:3: He has remembered his steadfast love and faithfulness to the

house of Israel. All the ends of the earth have seen the victory of our God. (Psalms 98:3)

Verse 54 Cf. You will show faithfulness to Jacob and unswerving loyalty to Abraham, as you have sworn to our ancestors from the days of old. (Micah 7:20) God said to Abraham, "As for you, you shall keep my covenant, you and your offspring after you throughout their generations." (Genesis 17:9) This closing lines recognise that the salvation that is to come through the birth and life, ministry and death of Jesus is related to the covenant made by God with Abraham of old. The Christians who said this hymn saw themselves as the remnant of Israel.

It is, of course, strange that Mary seems not to stay for the birth (six plus three equals nine, after all), but Luke has no use for such an eventuality in his carefully contrasting layout of scenes.

POINTERS FOR PRAYER

1. The story of the Visitation is a story of two pregnant women reaching out to one another. For those of you who are mothers, perhaps you have been in that situation. What blessings do you recall in such encounters?
2. The story and the song of Mary are both celebrating the work of God in their lives. When have you been particularly grateful for what was happening in your life? How did you express and celebrate your thanks?
3. Mary is praised for believing that God's promise to her would be fulfilled. How has your trust in God's promise to be with you helped you in your life?
4. Read the Magnificat a few times slowly and let your attention stay with whatever words or phrase you are drawn to. Place yourself in the position of the one saying the prayer. Let it be your prayer of thanksgiving for your own life.

PRAYER

Faithful to your promise, O God, you have lifted up the lowly, clothing with heavenly splendour the woman who bore Christ, our life and resurrection.

Grant that the Church, prefigured in Mary, may bear Christ to the world and come to share his triumph.

We ask this through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, God for ever and ever. Amen.