

Sermon – Advent 4 – Holy Trinity, Valley Stream NY

Luke 1: 39-55

I once heard of a church described as the ‘land of the misfit toys.’ As a Church we may well feel like a gathering of ‘misfit toys’ at times. At times in our lives many of us might feel left out but in the church we seek acceptance and commonality in our faith.

When we experience the isolation of feeling left out we may choose to focus on those that seem to be included, those so confident and so sure of themselves, so engaged with all aspects of life in community. These people exude a confidence of belonging. So we who might feel left out seek out places to feel included and the church is a place that should help people to feel included.

In other parts of society clubs have developed as places where people meet up with like-minded people for particular purposes. There are all sorts of clubs in society today from clubs in schools and colleges, to political, sporting and social clubs in communities. Most have a particular purpose or activity and most have some barrier to entry. Membership might be limited to a set number of people, or be limited by the entry fees, political leanings, gender or who you might know.

One thing that clubs all tend to have in common is that they exclude at some level. Identity and worth of membership is achieved by excluding those that don’t measure up for some reason. Who wants to join a club only to be harassed or confronted with someone with opposing views or someone who doesn’t like where you come from or how you look. Once you are in though you generally get a say on who should be let in and who should not.

It is sad to say but many of our churches, across all denominations, take on this culture of a club. We even use the language of membership to describe our formal connection to the church. We also annually pledge to support the church with our financial offerings, sometimes called ‘dues’ or fees. The Episcopal Church is well known for the signs that hang in front of nearly every one of our churches. What does the sign say? “The Episcopal Church welcomes you.” But do we always welcome?

Many of our parishes have fallen into the trap of turning inward for survival. By focusing inward, the culture says that you are welcome but you will have to break into this group of members to feel truly welcome. A parish must understand its culture and work to ensure it is open and celebrates the outsider, not club-like with barriers to join.

Our parishes must be outward focused so we can undertake the necessary evangelism we are called to do to spread the good news of Jesus Christ. As the body of the resurrected Christ we are filled with the Holy Spirit. Being filled with the Holy Spirit means we do the work of God with joy and wonder and energy.

Luke, the physician and historian, and the writer of today's gospel reading, was a gentile, an outsider in first century Palestine. His writings focus on the role and place of the outsider in the ministry of Jesus Christ. He highlights for us the role of women, common laborers, like shepherds, those that were different, like the Samaritans, and the poor. Maybe these are the first century 'misfit toys' excluded from mainstream society.

On this last Sunday of Advent our attention is ever so gently turned towards Mary, the betrothed of Joseph, a young girl by our understanding but in the first century a woman of an age to marry and to start a family. Luke provides us with this wonderful account of Mary and her cousin Elizabeth, a much older woman. These two women were outsiders in their communities but two women by their faith in God, helped change the world.

We pick up the story after the annunciation where Mary was visited by the angel Gabriel. He told her that the Lord had selected her to bear a child who was to be called Jesus, and "who [would] be great, and [would] be called the Son of the Most High." After Gabriel reassured her that her older cousin Elizabeth, who had been unable to conceive, was also with child, Mary consented with those wonderful words, "Here I am, the servant of the Lord; let it be done to me according to your word."

Mary was so filled with wonder and excitement that she immediately headed off to visit Elizabeth. Mary resembled the sacred Ark of the Covenant, carrying the sacred Presence, Jesus the Son of God, with the Holy Spirit before her like the cloud that lead the ark through the desert to the promised land. Mary journeyed with energy as she hastened on to tell her news to Elizabeth and to celebrate with her.

Mary carried to Judea the news of peace, goodwill and salvation. Her haste and her joy well illustrate the later mission of the Apostles and the Church after her. Mary is the archetype of the Church as it should be, "filled with the Holy Spirit, carrying the Christ child within, bearing the Word."

Author Max Thurian says, "Indwelt by the Holy Spirit, bearing the Word and the Body of Christ, the Church has only one desire and one joy and that is to transmit them to all people that they too may share in the peace, goodwill and salvation by a proclamation of God's rule."¹ Further he says, "The church spiritually bears within her the Word of God as Mary does both physically and spiritually. The Church is to cause the greeting of God to be made known to all: *The Lord be with you.*"²

When Mary reaches Elizabeth she immediately feels her son stirring within her, reacting to the power of Mary's presence in bringing news of her pregnancy with the Son of God. The unborn John trembles with joy in a way that David "danced and leapt with joy before the Ark of the Covenant at the entering of Jerusalem."³

¹ Thurian, Max *Mary; Mother of the Lord, Figure of the Church* The Faith Press, London 1963, p67

² *ibid* p68

³ *ibid* p67

Mary's presence fills Elizabeth with the Holy Spirit and the knowledge that Mary is blessed to be carrying the child of God. This is the beginning of "messianic rejoicing" related to the unity that has come about as this mother truly comes to understand her link to the mission of the Lord, the savior of God's people. This unity of mother and son emphasizes very strongly the reality of the incarnation where God has truly taken flesh in the Virgin Mary, *is* the Son of Mary, and Mary *is* the Mother of God."⁴

Mary's realization of Gabriel's promise, and Elizabeth's blessing of Mary for believing, causes Mary to proclaim the glory of the Lord in these famous words that we now know as *the Magnificat*, Latin for 'glorifies'. The words she chooses drip with ancient Jewish praise to God. "My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my savior." This opening phrase should be a mantra that we all adopt and recite each and every morning.

With Mary chosen as the vessel to bear our Lord, we too are chosen as the vessel to bear the Body of Christ in this world. The Church as the gathering of the Body of Christ must magnify the Lord and rejoice as we take the word of Jesus Christ out into the world with joy and wonder. None of us can predict when an angel of the Lord will appear before us, nor can we predict how the Holy Spirit works in the souls of those that we touch with our own lives, be it with words, or more importantly with our example of Godly living.

The Church cannot be a club-like place that excludes anyone. The Church is the holy vessel of God's spirit with a mission to bear to the world peace, goodwill and salvation by the proclamation of the reign of God, and his son Jesus Christ. When the Church acts in the world the way God intends it awakens in people the signs of faith. It is like the spark that was ignited when Mary arrived at Elizabeth's door that caused John to tremble in her womb with joy.

The Church must be open and truly welcoming of everyone. The Church must go out into the community like Mary and touch those that haven't heard the good news of Jesus Christ. This is the church's mission; to reconcile all people to God through Jesus Christ. Some churches seek to burst forth into the world with strong words and snappy slogans, but the Church should go out and take her place humbly at the table of the poor, the lonely, the laborer and the outsider.

Elizabeth blessed Mary for her belief in the message of the Lord. Her blessing is like a benediction where we acknowledge the act of grace of the Lord upon us and upon others. We too bless those that we encounter in God's name. We bless them by standing with them, welcoming them, baptizing them and caring for them at all times.

God has richly blessed us, and with our lives of Godly example we bless the lives of others so that they too may be fully embraced by the love of God and the joy of believing in the power of the Holy Spirit.

Amen

⁴ ibid