

By a happy coincidence this year's (albeit virtual) National Pilgrimage yesterday fell on the feast of the Visitation of Mary to Elizabeth, two cousins both expecting babies. St Luke records Elizabeth's words: ***When the voice of your greeting came to my ears the babe in my womb leaped for joy.***

The unborn John the Baptist acknowledged his cousin, the equally unborn Jesus, the Lord of Mary, of Elizabeth, of himself and of all of us. Jesus came to John hidden, carried by his mother, revealed by a word of greeting, hailed by a silent leap of joy.

There are so many lessons to be drawn from this, but let me mention just four key themes.

First, Jesus comes in a hidden way. The God of the Bible makes himself known in strange and easily misunderstood or even ignored ways. We need to expect to encounter God in the most unlikely of places. Let us pray that the Spirit who filled Elizabeth at Mary's approach will make us sensitive too to the hidden presence of Jesus. We should expect to be surprised by the humility and the ordinariness of Jesus' approach.

Second, God uses human beings as his agents. It was Mary who carried Jesus. Without her Jesus would not have been born. Through God's choice and her obedience Mary bore the Son, the Word of God. And here, with the hidden Messiah still in her womb Mary visits her cousin. So too we who have received the word of God must bear him to the world. We are all called like Mary to be Godbearers, and like those first disciples to be the means by whom Jesus becomes present to others.

Third we hear that it was when Elizabeth received "the voice of Mary's greeting" that John recognised Jesus. Friendship, hospitality, greeting, and the words we use to express them are important means for sharing the gospel. This is more than merely human sociability, but a real sign of the kingdom of God that lies beyond this world.

Lastly, the babe in Elizabeth's womb leapt for joy. Joy at the presence of Jesus is one of the characteristic marks of Christian life. It is like the joy we have in the company of our friends. It is like the joy we have in the best and noblest experiences of life, of beauty, of culture. It is like all these, but it transcends them, because it is the real joy at the heart of them all. It is the joy of knowing that we are truly and peacefully at home in our Father's home, a home to which each and every person is invited, a home in which barriers are broken down, fears removed and everyone can be free to be his or her true self as a son or daughter of God.