

***This month's reflection is based on a sermon preached at a virtual pilgrimage to Walsingham held at St James, Milton on 26<sup>th</sup> June 2021.***

June 24<sup>th</sup> was the feast of the nativity of St John Baptist.

John is one of only three biblical figures whose births are commemorated in the Church's calendar: the others being of course our Lord himself and his mother, Mary.

Usually, we remember the saints on the anniversaries of their deaths, that being, as we believe, their entry into glory, the glory for which in the case of the saints they were created, and in the case of Jesus the glory he shared with the Father from all eternity. Well, we do of course honour John the Baptist, Jesus and Mary on the days of their deaths, but we also celebrate their birthdays. In this way the Church makes a particular point of reminding us that those births mark a new beginning, the dawn of a new age. They are the hinge between the Old and New Testaments. You may remember the beginning of the Letter to the Hebrews; *In many and various ways God spoke to our ancestors through the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son, whom he appointed as heir of all things, through whom he also created the world.* That Son is Jesus, Mary his mother and John his forerunner. Early writers saw particular symbolism in the fact that John was born to aged parents, seeing him as the last of the "old" prophets, while Jesus was born to a teenage mother, as befits the dawning of a new age.

Nothing surprising or unfamiliar in any of that. But here's a thought that may not have occurred to you. Try to get your minds round the chronology of the 3 months that began on 25<sup>th</sup> March, the Annunciation, the feast of the Incarnation. No sooner pregnant with Jesus, Mary went with haste to visit her cousin Elizabeth, joyfully in her old age 6 months pregnant with her own son who would be John the Baptist. We commemorated that family gathering on the Feast of the Visitation, 31<sup>st</sup> May, this year the occasion of the largely virtual National Pilgrimage.

Mary arrived at the house of Elizabeth and Zechariah shortly after 25<sup>th</sup> March. All we know about that visit is what St Luke tells us in this morning's gospel (Lk 1.39-56). We heard about the mutual recognition and greeting not only of the expectant mothers but also of their unborn babies. We heard Elizabeth's praise of Mary and Mary's joyful song, the Magnificat, which has been said or sung at Evening Prayer for at least the past 1500 years.

Luke's account ends with the apparently rather lame statement that "*Mary remained with Elizabeth for about three months and then returned to her home.*"

Why, I wonder, did Luke specify how long Mary had stayed with Elizabeth? This detail conceals a surprising truth. Mary was probably still with Elizabeth when John was born on 24<sup>th</sup> June. Well, we shall never know for sure and Bible scholars don't agree, but it is at least an intriguing question, whether Mary, the Mother of God, may also have been the midwife of his forerunner, John the Baptist?

It is easy to see all this as a rather touching tale of motherly solidarity - after all, Luke has often been regarded mainly as a useful source of Sunday School stories! But that would be to miss the point of his carefully constructed narrative. This is not "an everyday story of countryfolk" but doctrine. Luke wants us to understand that these babies in the womb are the hinge of human history. In them God would fulfil all the prophecies of the O.T.

Remember how both pregnancies began with angelic messages, that is to say messages from God. The previously childless Elizabeth and the virgin Mary are God's willing agents, but their cooperation is responsive. The initiative is God's.

It always is. As well as their own part in history, Mary and Elizabeth are examples of a great truth that lies at the heart of reality.

You and I are not in control of our own lives and destinies.

Of course the choices we make are important, but we can only choose within the range of possibilities God sets before us. Most of our choices probably don't make much difference and we shouldn't agonise about them as much as we do; but sometimes they matter very much and can have lasting consequences for ourselves, for those around us and even the rest of the world. Sometimes they involve a clear choice between obeying or not obeying God's will and sometimes, just occasionally, they might affect the whole of the rest of human history. Some early Christian teachers reflected on the moment when everything hung on the answer Mary would give to the angel.

God is of course perfectly capable of acting with or without our consent, but that does not seem to be God's preferred way of working. Rather, God invites

our cooperation and so it is important for us to be as prepared as possible to recognise the choices God offers and to respond to them.

St Augustine once said *Mary conceived in her heart before she conceived in her womb*. That's a lovely image. God is free to act because Mary trusted. That's why Elizabeth could honour her as in this morning's gospel: *Blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfilment of what was spoken to her by the Lord*.

Some years ago Pope Francis reflected on this: *according to the logic of the Gospel nothing is more productive and fruitful than listening to and accepting the Word of the Lord, which comes from the Gospel, from the Bible. The Lord is always speaking to us! The attitude of Mary of Nazareth shows us that being comes before doing, and to leave the doing to God in order to be truly as he wants us. It is He who works so many marvels in us. Mary is receptive, but not passive.* (Address at the Angelus, 8<sup>th</sup> December 2014)

Mary and Elizabeth belonged to a group of people sometimes known as the *anawim*. It's a Hebrew word rather difficult to translate as a single word, but it means, poor, marginalised, downtrodden, those whom the powerful don't notice except as servants. But for all those meanings, the *anawim* did not see themselves as victims, but rather as people who knew that all power and the outcome of history is in God's hands. They trusted in God completely to vindicate them in God's own good time and God's own good way and joyfully willing to play their part, however surprising that part may seem to be. As Pope Francis said, *receptive but not passive*. Our part, God's faithful that is, is to wait expectantly, praying for the grace to hear God's word and heed God's calling. We have been created neither to be helpless doormats nor self-made men and women, but God's agents and co-workers.

In the meeting of Mary and Elizabeth two such agents acknowledged and gave thanks for each other. May we too accept in faith the path God has prepared for each of us, and also learn to recognise God's grace in others. Pilgrimage does after all require us to travel together.