

Visitation

This little scene from the birth-narrative in the Gospel of Luke has several factors that we should notice. First, it involves women and only women; that in itself displays the overturning of Biblical custom, where practically all the attention is given to what men say and do. Secondly, we should know that it stands at a strategic point in the story. We have read about the meeting of Zechariah and the angel Gabriel in the Holy of Holies, where Zechariah refuses the good news of his future son, John the Baptist, and is struck dumb; and we have seen how he returns to Elizabeth, and the annunciation comes true, and she is expecting the baby; but she shares in her husband's silence, and "keeps it to herself", so that no-one else realises that something extraordinary is happening to her.

We have also read the parallel story of Gabriel's visit to Mary at Nazareth, and the way in which she receives the annunciation of the birth of Jesus; and how the angel tells her of Elizabeth's pregnancy, which will be a sign to her that "with God anything is possible".

Throughout the first two chapters of Luke these two stories stand side by side; and in each story the birth of Jesus excels in wonder the birth of John, so that we always realise that the one who comes second is really the first. But in this feast we see the two stories intertwining; Mary is coming to see if what she has been told is true. In their meeting both the women realise that they are sharers in knowledge that no-one else has - we have no account of anyone revealing to Elizabeth anything of the baby that Mary is expecting; and the exalted nature of their meeting is graced by words which still echo in the minds of millions every day: the Hail Mary and the Magnificat.

It isn't very often that most people use beautiful language or allow themselves to have a sense of exaltation about their lives. Some unfortunate souls go through the whole story without ever feeling that they are important, or that they are precious to another, or to others, or to God. But because this little story has been enshrined as the second Joyful mystery of the Rosary, uncountable numbers of people will have lent their minds to meditating on the image of two humble women caught up into the mighty mystery of the Incarnation. They will have pondered in their hearts the image of Mary, bursting with the great words of the Archangel, and overwhelmed by the thought that she has been chosen to be fruitful for the coming of the Messiah; how she moves with such energy and purpose through the hills to find Elizabeth, and simply to cross her threshold, and to meet her gaze; and indeed it has been a favourite moment for artists, who have loved the drama where knowledge is perfectly shared without a word spoken, in a single glance.

Because of this presence in our lives of the lovely scene we celebrate, we ourselves can take on our lips the beautiful and exalted words of Mary and Elizabeth, and we can see our own lives caught up and revalued, as theirs are, by the grace and glory of the coming of Christ. This is the mystery we take as our meaning, and access each day as we cross the threshold of this house of meanings, and repeat for ourselves the words Mary gives us: *he has pulled down princes from their thrones, and exalted the lowly; the Lord has done great things for me; Holy his name.*