

Steven's reflection on Luke 1:39-55 for 22 December 2024

In the gospel reading today we heard how Mary arose and went with haste into the hill country, to a town in Judea, where she entered the house of Zechariah and was greeted by her cousin Elizabeth. That town in the Judean hill country is called Ein Kerem. And it is a stunningly beautiful little village, currently dominated by the Church of the Visitation which was built as a memorial for the events in today's reading. The only thing to mar the loveliness of the place is the knowledge that the beautiful stone buildings are no longer occupied by the Palestinian people who built them. But that's another story for another day.

We're thinking about Mary and the journey she made from Galilee to Judea. We are never told in the story *why* Mary made this visit, or why she went with such haste. But what would *you* do if an angel came and told you about a miracle that was about to happen, and about to happen in your own body? What does one do after talking to an angel? One doesn't just drop it into the conversation at tea the next day! Would it be easy for you to believe that you've actually spoken to an angel? And if you do believe that God has sent you a personal messenger, who will believe *you*? Who do you tell? Do you tell *anyone*? Joseph didn't believe Mary until he got his own personal message from God. What did the local rabbi and all the town folk of Nazareth think about Mary's pregnancy?

Quite naturally Mary goes somewhere where she will be believed and understood, to another family that has had its own personal experience of God's activity. And how is Mary received by that family? Filled with the Holy Spirit, Elizabeth shouts a greeting of blessing and encouragement: "*Blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfilment of what was spoken to her from the Lord.*"

The purpose of the visit was so that Mary might be strengthened and encouraged in what she already believed, so that she might bear up under the lonely years of cherishing in her heart the strange works of her son Jesus, the long difficult years of watching her own flesh and blood growing into the saviour of all mankind.

Faith is not a matter of believing six impossible things before breakfast. That is not God's blessing, that's madness. Faith is not an assent of the mind to the highly implausible. Rather it is an openness and obedience to God's will, and the limitless possibilities that flow from that obedience.

As Mary went to Elizabeth to be with someone who understood what was happening, so we must meet together with those who share our faith, that our faith may be strengthened and encouraged and nurtured as we carry on in the general environment of disbelief in which we find ourselves. That is why we are church, encouraging one another, blessing one another. That is *our* visitation, saying to one another, Blessed are they who believe that there will be a fulfilment of what has been spoken to them from the Lord.

You don't go to church just for yourself, but for the blessing of the person sitting next to you. Church is a safe haven for those who know and love the Lord.

Micah tells us that the Messiah to come would feed his flock in the strength of the Lord. In the strength of the Body of Christ we come together to praise and worship our loving creator and receive his blessing.

It was also the prophet Micah who said that what the Lord requires of us is that we should act justly, love mercy and walk humbly with God. Humility and meekness are not the same things as just being nice or weak, timid or inoffensive.

The Christian path is a difficult balancing act. Being meek and merciful and humble, without being weak and feeble and offering oneself as a doormat, is tough. We need to have a righteous sense of mercy, a righteous sense of humility, a righteous sense of justice.

In the end it's not the church structures that are important, it's each other. We the people are the Church and we are here to encourage one another, and no matter what changes may be ahead for us in our church, our love for each other can never be taken away.