

inner encounter
a sermon preached on the
fourth Sunday of advent

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at

st john's
ANGLICAN CHURCH CAMBERWELL

by *fr david moore*, vicar

the lections: Micah 5:2-5a, Song of Mary, Hebrews 10:5-10, Luke 1:39-55

We are awaiting. We are awaiting a birth. The time seems to drag on, interminably. We don't know when it will come. We just want to get on with it – to get it over and done with. But the gestation process will not be coerced by us.

Our world is awaiting. The whole world is awaiting, a breakthrough – the birth of the new humanity, no longer marred by poverty, violence, warmongering, homelessness, systemic economic injustice. We believe in 'progress': the birth of the better. But we cannot control the gestation process. What we are required to do, however, is cooperate with something infinitely greater than our selves. How?

As I said on Advent Sunday, Advent is spiritual exercise, a set of exercises, if you like, to make us spiritually fit. The deep wisdom of Advent is that it speaks directly into our experience of the here and now. Only when Advent and Christmas have been allowed to be taken over by sentimentality and merchandising are they lost to a historical pantomime. But we are gifted with this astonishing spiritual exercise, or path, by which we are assisted to navigate the chaos and uncertainty and anxiety of our time, in order to give birth to the new humanity.

Being plunged into chaos and uncertainty – the breakdown of all that seemed secure and certain – is a universal human experience. There are countless millions in our world experiencing this in shocking and terrifying ways. Resisting the temptation to either anaesthesia or despair, Advent Two's spiritual wisdom is wilderness: silence, waiting. Advent Three is the way of separation from the collective identity – going the way of the Jesus in fact – resisting the widespread unconscious mass-mindedness of the collective.

And in this fourth movement of the soul, something truly remarkable happens. Look closely at today's story of 'the Visitation': and see that its three actors are all having something done *to them*, by Something, a Someone, much greater than themselves. None of them can claim credit for what is happening. This fact is perhaps more crucial in our time than ever before, since our culture places such importance on claiming credit for our accomplishments. The evangelical insight today is that all three have been plunged into chaos, silenced by wilderness. All have left the apparent safety, and the certain straitjacketing of the collective.

Mary enters Zechariah's house. Note, it's not described as Elizabeth's house, even though Mary is going to see Elizabeth. It's a patriarchal world, a man's house. Yet Zechariah is invisible, has been silenced, by angel of the Lord.¹ He has nothing to say! This phase of the spiritual undertaking cannot be accomplished by the masculine aspect. Let me be clear that I'm not talking about men or women, rather, the masculine aspect which is a reality of both men and women. The great work to take place here in all people is the work of the feminine.

Elizabeth is six months pregnant, and "in seclusion".² As an old barren woman³ she is familiar with the shame of this fact in her cultural context, the immensely negative power of the group.

The young girl Mary – perhaps about 13 – has well and truly left the comfort and safety of her group. Her inexplicable and dubious pregnancy⁴ makes her a dangerous threat to its imagined purity – if they knew, they would surely stone her to death.

Something momentous is being prepared, in secret! In the midst of the chaos, it's the hidden place, the secret place. Elizabeth is confined... What's taking place in Mary is hidden, out of sight... The masculine is silenced and invisible...

Those familiar with the gospel will not be surprised: Go into your hidden room, shut the door⁵... Nicodemus comes to Jesus by night⁶... The Samaritan woman argues with Jesus out of

¹ Luke 1:20

² Luke 1:24

³ Luke 1:7

⁴ Luke 1:34

sight of the crowds⁷... To you the secrets of the kingdom have been revealed⁸... Resurrection takes place out of sight, in the ground⁹... The dead are raised, from the earth, like the single grain that dies¹⁰... Micah had declared long ago that the ‘one to rule’ would arise from a ‘little clan’¹¹... The writer of the letter to the Hebrews declared that sacrifices and offerings, which are visible, are to give way to something hidden in a human body¹²...

So in the hidden place, out of sight, in secret, in silence, well away from the collective mind and the endless chatter, the world’s chaos, uncertainty, anxiety, and fear is being met with an answer. And that answer is an *inner meeting*; a profound knowing, a deep recognition that defies masculine logic and rule. The six-month old unborn child ‘leaps’ in the old barren womb in the presence of the newly-pregnant teenage girl.¹³

The unexpected breakthrough that transcends our chaos is a wordless symbol, which John the Evangelist will later identify with the eternal Word.¹⁴ Words (plural) follow the encounter. And the very first word is a word of blessing: “Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb [Jesus]”.¹⁵

So as I have been saying, Advent is a spiritual way, a praxis, a spiritual exercise. We’re not here for interesting historical information. We’re not a preservation society. We’re here to undergo *evangelion*: to be transformed; to be born again; to become what we worship and ‘become what we eat’; to give birth to the Divine in our time and place.

Notice that I said ‘undergo’ evangelion: not talk about it, but actually embody it. We have become so accustomed to the 16th century distortion of reducing the beautiful word ‘evangelical’ to a political party and to endless talk. But the Christian path – like other great religious paths – is not merely a set of ideas of facts to be rehearsed and broadcast as though we were selling mince pies or laptops. Rather, it’s a *way*. In the precious Hebrew word of the Jewish religious tradition of Jesus: *Halakah*, walking, following the path. ‘Follow me!’ he said: not prattle on about me like your marketing campaigns.

And today’s story of ‘the Visitation’ shows us a fourth phase of this evangelical way, this spiritual walking, by all persons made in the image and likeness of God. Entering the chaos, accepting the silence of wilderness, taking the risk of separation from the collective, awaiting, experiencing the inner encounter, the deep meeting, we may become ready to become God-bearers, with Mary, to be birthgivers to that which we do not create or control, to allow something to be ‘done unto us’,¹⁶ by Another, by the Great Other.

As those who are awaiting, may our voices join with Mary’s: “My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour”.¹⁷

vicar@stjohnscamberwell.org.au

5 Matthew 6:6
6 John 3:2
7 John 4:6
8 Matthew 13:11
9 Luke 24:1-3
10 John 12:24
11 Micah 4:4
12 Hebrews 10:5,9-10
13 Luke 1:41,44
14 John 1:1
15 Luke 1:42
16 Luke 1:38
17 Luke 1:47