

Our Gospel story has a domestic, intimate, and earthy setting which allows us to view the mother of Jesus as a whole person. Luke's account of the Visitation gives us a portrait of Mary that cuts through most of our assumptions and stereotypes.

A nuanced portrait that balances fear with courage, doubt with faith, vulnerability with strength. It gives us a portrait of ourselves – of what we, the Church, might become at our very best. And does so in three gifts.

The gift of community:

As soon as Mary says yes to Gabriel's astonishing request, she goes in haste to see Elizabeth. She doesn't isolate herself. She doesn't keep God's revelation a secret. She seeks out a fellow-traveller. Tradition tells us that Mary is only a young girl, a virgin, when the angel Gabriel appears to her. In her cultural and religious context, her pregnancy is a scandal. At best, it renders her an object of scornful gossip. At worst, it places her at risk of death by stoning.

Mary needs safety, affirmation, empathy, and companionship. She needs someone to recognise, nurture, deepen, and celebrate the work of God in her life. Someone who will receive, not reject. Love, not judge. Nourish, not condemn.

Could there possibly be a better job description for the Church? A better prototype for Christian community? What would it be like if we sought each other out with the trust and openness of Mary? What would it be like if like Elizabeth we received with tenderness the marginalised and vulnerable people who dare to come to us, seeking refuge and nurture? What would it be like if our communal worship echoed the shared focus and love of these two kinswomen who find themselves caught up in God's bold, risky, world-changing work, and decide to find strength in each other's company? Finding common ground in their love for Jesus. What would it be like? Henri Nouwen describes it,

God's most radical intervention into history was listened to and received in community.

A challenging example for us to live up to.

The gift of blessing:

Part of what's so challenging about Mary's story is its brevity. We know from the Gospel accounts that she's perplexed by Gabriel's announcement. We also know that she says yes to the angel. So much lies hidden beneath that seemingly quick and simple yes. So many questions. So many possibilities. So many occasions for doubt. Into this turmoil of questions comes an outpouring of blessing, with Elizabeth telling Mary

Blessed are you among women,
and blessed is the fruit of your womb.

Blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord.

Elizabeth astutely makes the connection between trust and blessing. Knowing Mary's favoured status having nothing to do with wealth, health, comfort, or ease. Her blessing lies solely in her willingness to trust God and to surrender to God's will.

I wonder how desperately Mary needs this blessing by the time she arrives on Elizabeth's doorstep, exhausted and scared. How badly she needs someone to remind her that after the angel leaves, God's faithfulness remains. I am sure Mary carried Elizabeth's blessing in her heart all the days as she pondered. How blessed did she feel when she delivers her firstborn in a stable? When she becomes a refugee, fleeing to Egypt to prevent her son's murder? What does blessing feel like for her years later, when her miraculously conceived child is arrested? Beaten? Mocked? Killed?

God's call on Mary's life requires her to be profoundly courageous and countercultural, to trust an inner vision few others understand or value.

Elizabeth recognises that Mary's faith is precious. This faith will fuel the ongoing surrender Mary's journey will require. Elizabeth names and blesses Mary's capacity for deep trust as a gift worth cherishing.

We don't live in a time or culture that encourages us to bless one another, and that is a terrible shame. What would it be like to recover Elizabeth's vocation of blessing? To cultivate spiritual attentiveness? To gaze long and deeply at each other, looking for glimpses of God?

How would our church change if we made a point of discerning, naming, and blessing the divine gifts we see in each other?

Elizabeth exclaims with a loud cry when she recognises God's life-changing work in Mary. Joy flourishes when we're willing to humbly bless each other.

The gift of hope:

Once Mary receives both community and blessing, she finds her prophetic voice. At the end of our Gospel reading, she bursts into song. Not just any song, but a radical, hope-drenched song that soars with promise for the world's poor, broken hearted, and oppressed.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer describes Mary's song - this way

It is at once the most passionate, the wildest,
one might even say the most revolutionary Advent hymn
ever sung.

This is not the gentle, tender, dreamy Mary whom we sometimes see in paintings. ... This song has none of the sweet, nostalgic, or even playful tones of some of our Christmas carols.

It is instead a hard, strong, unstoppable song about the power of God and the powerlessness of humankind.

May our life be in tune with Mary's song.

Wendy