

Commentary on the Gospel for Mon, Dec 21st 2015

Contemplating the Visitation with Zechariah

No sooner do we read about Gabriel's announcement to Mary of God's surprising role for her in the history of Israel's covenant life with God—a moment when this humble teen-ager might be overcome with self-consciousness (after all, she is embarrassingly unwed but pregnant, and yet pregnant with what the angelic messenger called the Son of the Most High) — Mary thinks immediately of the needs of someone else, her post-menopausal aunt whom she has just learned is also surprisingly pregnant, indeed in her sixth month. Mary travels immediately to the hill country (to a town just west of Jerusalem) to assist her during the final months. The meeting of those two women has been portrayed in art as a time of robust joy and amazement, catching the zest of Luke's account. On my campus at Creighton University, the moment is embodied in two life-sized bronzes, a young woman and an older one, both pregnant, joyfully rushing toward one another to embrace.

Luke's words burst with the same joy and wonder. Mary entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. It may be Zechariah's house, but this meeting is woman-to-woman and, it turns out, unborn child meets unborn child. For when Elizabeth heard the greeting of Mary, the babe leaped in her womb. For Elizabeth, this leaping is no mere coincidence. The lives of these children will be intimately linked. The angel Gabriel had promised Zechariah that his child would be filled with the Holy Spirit “even from his mother's womb” and now she too is filled with that Spirit, and gives voice to a prophecy of her own:

“Blessed are you among women, and blessed in is fruit of your womb. And how does this happen to me, that the mother of my Lord should come to me?”

That Elizabeth should call Mary “the mother of my Lord” is stunningly prophetic, for in that phrase this woman is professing a confession of faith that the Christian community as a whole would come to only after Easter and Pentecost—that Jesus is fittingly called by the divine title “the Lord,” and that consequently Mary can be addressed, as indeed we do every time we pray the “Hail Mary,” “mother of God.” And Elizabeth proceeds to utter the first Beatitude of the Gospel:

“For the moment the sound of your greeting reached my ears, the infant in my womb leaped for joy. Blessed are you who believed that what was spoken to you by the Lord would be fulfilled.”

It is easy to understand why an order of Catholic nuns should name their congregation the Order of the Visitation of Holy Mary, or the Visitation Sisters. For this event, so briefly told in Luke's Gospel, captures in a few sentences the Church's mission of evangelization, the joyful sharing of the good news of the incarnation of the Son of God as Jesus Christ. Our best way of immersing ourselves in this moment of Advent is to simply contemplate this visit of Mary to bring Jesus to Elizabeth in a spontaneous outreach of joyful service. If we would like to nurture our appreciation of this mystery and mission, now might be a good time to begin to re-read Pope Francis' “Joy of the Gospel.”

Dennis Hamm, S.J.-Creighton University's Theology Department