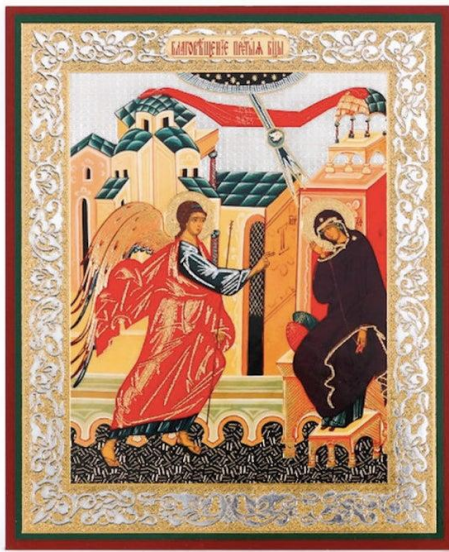


Facebook Reflections 1-6 June

Monday



On this day the church recalls and thinks about the visit of the Virgin Mary to her cousin Elizabeth after Mary has heard from the Angel Gabriel that God wants her to bear His Son. Since there is link between the two events I will spend this week with some reflections on both stories.

In the sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee, ²⁷ to a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David. The virgin's name was Mary. ²⁸ The angel went to her and said, "Greetings, you who are highly favoured! The Lord is with you."

There are various English translations of the Greek text of Luke about Mary having some special favour from God. There is a traditional Catholic prayer "*Hail Mary, full of Grace...*" that is derived from the passage. What made her "full of grace? What made her to be "highly favoured?" Was she such a very virtuous young woman that had earned God's favour by the purity of her life? Yet how could she be, since like every one of us there were probably things in her life that meant that she was from time to time falling short of what God asked of her?

We need to consider the meaning of that special word "grace". It has too meanings. First it is God's special attitude of love towards us that we do not earn and can never possess by our own attempts of virtue. Second, it is an action of God giving inner spiritual power that enables us to be good. To say that Mary or any of us has grace, or to ask for grace is to ask both for that unmerited love and inner power of change, knowing that we need both. Mary and we are given both love we do not deserve and the power of change of character because of it.

Grace (favour) is given to Mary because of who God is as lover, and wants to do through her, and in which we are also included. Her divine favour given to her is a sign that points to our own gift from God as His beloved.

Tuesday



We continue to think the visit of the Angel to Mary.

²⁹ *Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be.*

³⁰ *But the angel said to her, “Do not be afraid, Mary; you have found favour with God. ³¹ You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you are to call him Jesus. ³² He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, ³³ and he will reign over Jacob’s descendants forever; his kingdom will never end.”*

³⁸ *“I am the Lord’s servant,” Mary answered. “May your word to me be fulfilled.”*

Mary is sometimes in tradition called the Second Eve. The First Eve in the book of Genesis represents the way humanity may rebel against the divine will in eating the forbidden fruit, she symbolises our individual and collective disobedience.

Mary in her acceptance of what God asks of her through the Angelic message therefore represents a new and better response to God and she starts the pathway to salvation for us. Her answer is part of the way that God will become present in her son, Jesus, and so her response begins to undo the damage of our sinfulness and wayward actions. She does not fully understand what is being asked of her but still says “yes” to God.

So Mary acts as a new representative of faithful believers in God, and especially in relation to Jesus. We also can make Him present in our own acts of will that chose what we feel God asks of us. Our own Yes to God is part of God acting for the salvation of the whole world in our time and place. Our response can be part of the way the world becomes the Kingdom of God

Wednesday.



Following the Angelic message to Mary that she will become pregnant with God's Son Mary travels to see her cousin Elizabeth. (Luke 1: 39-45)

At that time Mary got ready and hurried to a town in the hill country of Judea, ⁴⁰ where she entered Zechariah's home and greeted Elizabeth. ⁴¹ When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the baby leaped in her womb, and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. ⁴² In a loud voice she exclaimed: "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the child you will bear! ⁴³ But why am I so favoured, that the mother of my Lord should come to me? ⁴⁴ As soon as the sound of your greeting reached my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy. ⁴⁵ Blessed is she who has believed that the Lord would fulfil his promises to her!"

Why does Mary go to visit her cousin Elizabeth? I think it was because she needed some kind of reassurance after the message of the Angel. It was rather scary stuff she was experiencing. To the outer world she would be an unmarried mother, in breach of her being betrothed to Joseph. She could have at the least faced being ostracised and at worst she could have been stoned to death on suspicion of adultery. How would Joseph react to the news and would he or her parents believe her that she had done nothing wrong? She did not live a tolerant society like ours.

But in delivering his message to her the Angel has told her that her elder cousin, unable to bear children for all of her married life, was also rather miraculously having a baby too. Mary then sets out to see if it is true and share her own startling news with Elizabeth who she assumed would understand. The greeting of Elizabeth lets Mary know that without her telling her story Elizabeth knows about it. The Spirit reveals it to her and even the baby in her womb knows it too. What a comfort and reassurance that must have been.

We may face scary moments in our lives, but it may be that God has already gone on ahead of us as we try to face the scary stuff. He may use others as the means of our comfort and assurance.

Thursday



During Mary's visit to Elizabeth her response is a prayer of praise. It has become a great song of the church that we call the "*Magnificat*" (from the Latin text). We will look at parts of it in the next few days. I will use the traditional English version found in the Book of Common Prayer.

*My soul doth magnify the Lord and my spirit hath rejoiced in God my Saviour.
For he hath regarded the lowliness of his handmaiden.
For behold, from henceforth all generations shall call me blessed.
For he that is mighty hath magnified me and holy is his Name.*

The church has a long tradition of taking this special prayer and using it in liturgy. For centuries it was used in the early evening monastic prayers of Vespers. In the reformed Church of England Cranmer put it into the service of Evening Prayer. While it celebrates Mary's response to God asking her to be the Mother of His Son, it is also a song of the whole church. What she sings of herself is always to some extent our own song of our own calling by God into the fellowship of Father, Son and Holy Spirit, and we share in her blessedness and calling.

For each of us there is the fact that we can rejoice in God who is also our saviour from our waywardness. He looks upon us not with what we may possess in material things but that in fact we possess nothing of eternal worth, only what He gives. With her we have a blessed inheritance that others after us will celebrate and give thanks for our being included in the salvation He has prepared. It is He that raises us up into glory that is everlasting.

Friday



We continue to look at Mary's prayer, The Magnificat.

And his mercy is on them that fear him throughout all generations.

He hath shewed strength with his arm. He hath scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts.

He hath put down the mighty from their seat and hath exalted the humble and meek.

He hath filled the hungry with good things and the rich he hath sent empty away.

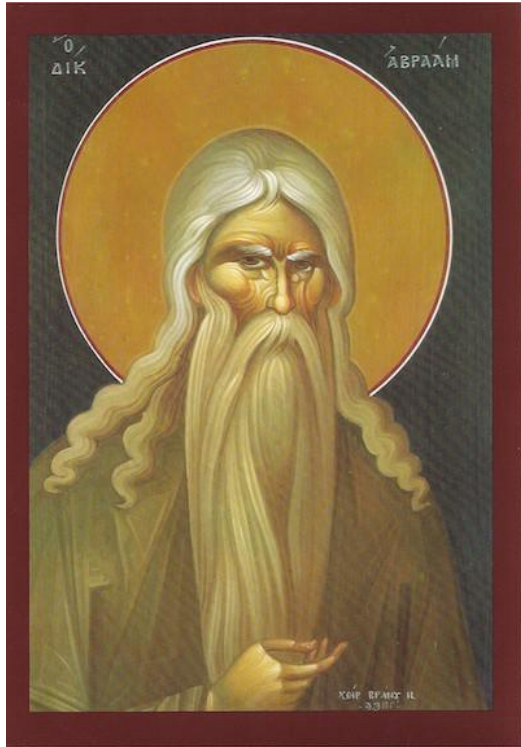
This is a radical prayer containing an upside –down way of life. It always has been. It fits in so greatly with Jesus teachings on the need of humility and radical sharing. It's about equality and levelling of society. Those who think they are great or need to be great and need lots of possessions are in trouble because God's heart and love is closer to those who have the least and count as less in the world.

One of the most celebrated saints in history is Francis of Assisi. The son of a wealthy middle class cloth merchant he handed everything back to his father and went out naked into the street. He embraced material poverty as a way of life that others also came to follow. He made friends with the poor and outcast and saw the whole of the natural world as his brothers and sisters. Many came to follow him in various ways even if they could not give up all wealth they gave of what they could to God and to the poor. The challenge of such simplicity of life remains for us all. It must affect what we try to possess and what we give instead.

Saturday

We look at the final part of Mary's prayer The Magnificat.

*He remembering his mercy hath holpen his servant Israel,
as he promised to our forefathers, Abraham and his seed for ever.*



This part of the song must be a constant reminder that the good news of Jesus as our Saviour has an ancient history. It stretches back to the calling of the nomad Abraham, called from following his Chaldean gods in Ur to follow the mysterious God who had no name. That this God was greater than all others and everything people vainly worship. We worship the God of Abraham who revealed Himself in many and diverse ways in the history of the people of Israel. Mary and indeed Jesus were the descendants of Abraham and that we should not forget that primary fact.

With this we must lament all the cruel things that the church has done to the many descendants of Abraham in its un-Christian history. We must continue to think about the terrible racial and religious divisions that still exist all around the world. With it we must remember that Jesus broke down the barrier between the physical descendants of Abraham and the peoples of Greece and Rome and many nations. Jesus was a Jew but He is universal in love and so must we be. His love and promises for the future exceeds all racial and ethnic boundaries.