

God our redeemer,
who prepared the Blessed Virgin Mary
to be the mother of your Son:
grant that, as she looked for his coming as our saviour,
so we may be ready to greet him
when he comes again as our judge.

My text can be found in today's gospel from Luke, chapter 1 and verse 41:

'When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leapt in her womb.'

Last week, our sermon focussed on the second fruit of the Spirit – joy. Today, I'd like to consider the joy felt by three people who experienced a tremendous sense of joy because they felt that they were in the presence of God, that in an ordinary place at an ordinary time in a very special way, God was present with them.

There are four people present in today's gospel: two unborn boys; two pregnant women. At their circumcision, one boy will be named John, the other Jesus. Elizabeth and Mary are cousins. I estimate Elizabeth has been pregnant for more than five months; Mary for a little over two.

When Elizabeth hears Mary's voice, her unborn baby stirs in her womb. The phrase doctor Luke uses in verse 44 is **'leaped for joy'**. The Greek word is

σκίρταω (skirtao) 'to bound', 'to spring'. Literally, the foetus stirs in his mother's womb, his tiny feet pressing against his mother as he reacts with joy at the sound of the voice of the mother of God and the presence of his unborn cousin. It's just like a footballer jumping for joy at having scored a goal – though in this case, the space for John to do so is necessarily limited.

The joy John feels is mirrored in the joy his mother, Elizabeth, experiences at hearing and seeing Mary. We know that the Angel Gabriel has told Mary of Elizabeth being pregnant. But we don't know how Elizabeth knows Mary is pregnant or who and what exactly the baby in Mary's womb truly is. But inspired by the Holy Spirit, Elizabeth articulates the truth with nothing short of direct knowledge: 'Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me? For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leaped for joy. And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfilment of what was spoken to her by the Lord.' Full of joy, Elizabeth shares her excitement with Mary. Elizabeth confirms the truth of what Mary already knows: that Mary is blessed among women and that the fruit of her womb, Jesus, is God's plan for our Salvation, a plan in which Mary has agreed to play her part.

And for her part, Mary too is excited and shares her excitement in that great song of praise which we know as the Magnificat. The opening captures the overwhelming joy Mary feels at being pregnant and part of God's plan for Man:

My soul magnifies the Lord

And my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour

Sometimes words are inadequate to express our joy. Perhaps jumping up and down does the trick but here Mary says simply that God is great and she's so happy to praise him for all that he does. Good or what ?

So we have three individuals excited at the presence of God in the person of the fourth person present. It is a gift of God that we as people can feel excited, full of joy. And here that joy is firmly rooted in being aware of Emmanuel – God with us. That is the gift of the incarnation – of the Word made flesh – that God is close to us and makes himself known to us in the person of his Son, Jesus Christ.

May God be present with us and known to us not only now this Christmastide but at all in times, both the good and the bad.

I have spoken in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,
Amen.

Preached at the Eucharist

St Bartholomew's, Dinard

23rd December, 2012

G: Sermon 27 : re Joy

