

Divine Encounter

Sermon by the Rev Derek Lightbourne Advent 4 St James and All Saints' 2018

Keynote Bible passage: Luke 1. 39 – 45

'Blessed are you among women and blessed is the fruit of your womb! Thus, Elizabeth wife of Zechariah greets the young Mary who by divine purpose is to give birth to the Saviour of the world. The opening chapters of Luke's gospel include delightfully moving accounts of 'divine encounter', the theme of this morning's sermon. Last week we were mindful of the angelic visitation to the elderly priest Zechariah to bring notice that he and Elizabeth would give birth to John, called to be messenger of the good news of the Messiah coming. Then the angel Gabriel comes to the young Mary and announces 'Greetings O favoured one. The Lord is with you...you will conceive in your womb and bear a son and you will name him Jesus.' Another divine encounter.

And now this morning's excerpt – Mary in her pregnancy goes to stay in seclusion with Elizabeth and Zechariah. As she hears Mary's greeting, she is stirred within as the child in her womb 'leaps with joy'. Luke shares a spiritual insight, Elizabeth is filled with the Holy Spirit and exclaims 'Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb!blessed is she who believed there would be a fulfilment of what was spoken to her by the Lord.' This leads to 'Mary's song (Magnificat) 'My soul magnifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour.'

And that's not all – at the birth of Jesus there's further divine encounters, given to the shepherds out in the fields who come adore the new born babe. 'So, they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in a manger.'

As I think of these events taking place some years before Luke wrote his gospel it seems to me there's a 'key verse' after all this, '*Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart.*' (2.19) At some point it is evident that Luke heard them from Mary. Otherwise how would he have known?

The Collect of the Day begins 'Gracious God, you have visited your people...Mary pondered these *divine encounters*, and so might we, and treasure them. It's my conviction these occur today for us believers. True they are not world-changing, but they may well have been life-changing for you and in your family. If I can name some possibilities from my own experience, you may well say, yes that's happened for me also. It's in those times God has seemed very present, or there's been a divine prompting to say or do something that you'd not at first thought of.

1) Divine encounters, they certainly happen in the *beauty of creation*.

Surely the writers of the Psalms were aware of such, as in Psalm 8: 'When I look at the heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars that you have established....O Lord our Lord, your greatness is seen in all the world!'

Recently while on a retreat I was on the west coast north of Taranaki and each day watched the sun set into the sea, with all its colours, each time different and constantly changing, and thinking of the miracle of the divine creation of this planet.

Poets can sometimes convey the thoughts, as in the hymn: 'The day thou gavest Lord is ended, the darkness falls at thy behest; to Thee our morning hymns ascended, Thy praise shall sanctify thy rest.'

2) A second aspect of 'divine encounter' can be in those '*meetings*' (God appointments) that are sometimes described as serendipity, or 'meant to be'. How many times has it happened you felt you were meant to be there? As I ponder life it seems to me that as one gets older 'being' predominates over 'doing'. Thus, in circumstances of pausing, one

readily becomes a 'listening ear'. There're times in our life that we need to talk to someone, or to have someone pray in a needy situation. It may be you have been there for someone in that way. And who's to say that God didn't enable that to be a divine encounter?

3) There're times also surely there's been the experience of divine prompting to act in some way, or to be there for another. I found in parish visiting that (divine) promptings led to be in contact with someone in particular need, or in sharing a celebration, and I didn't realise. Like Elizabeth's response when hearing the news of Mary and her son to be born. In a sense we too can echo that exclamation of praise 'My soul rejoices in God my Saviour.'

In all this also there's an important insight that is mentioned in these early stories – note Luke records 'In those days Mary set out and went *'with haste'*. Also, the shepherds after their divine encounter with the angels, 'Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us. 'And they went with haste.....' The 'key' here is to take opportunity as it presents – to take it in, focus, response be action or 'being'. It is preferable to act on intuition, and while one might not get it right always, don't lose the opportunity.

A 4th aspect is also in this account of the meeting of Elizabeth and Mary, I call it '*saying the words*.' Note how in the gospel stories Luke records words of praise and affirmation. In the world today and on so much media there is a putting down of people, in action or by words. Its distressing when leaders of nations do this and its distressing when I hear parents doing the same to their children, using derogatory words, 'you little'- often as an animal. One wonders what self-image these children will grow up into. Note how Elizabeth affirms Mary in her calling: 'Blessed are you..... At Christmas we give and receive gifts as a token of our love. We might also offer words of *affirmation* in some way expressing 'I love you.' I would far rather our children and grandchildren grow up with a positive self-image. Likewise, we affirm one another in worship by expressing the Peace of Christ in action and *word, and look each other in the eye*, a measure of sincerity. In ministry I've always regarded encouragement as an important quality. I'm mindful of St Paul's words 'Encourage one another just as you are doing'.

Finally, as the chronological year of 2018 draws to a close, we might take opportunity to reflect on what divine encounters you've experienced in this time. It may be experiences in God's creation, that beautiful rainbow or sunrise or sunset, in the beauty of flowers and forest. For me the year began with a voyage to the islands of the Southern Ocean. Known as the Roaring Forties our experience was of a 'calm and prosperous voyage' – in that there was more opportunity to appreciate the uniqueness of the flora and fauna.

While one might be at risk for over-emphasising it, I have observed a greater awareness and action of the issues of pollution and burning fossil fuels entering the atmosphere that the world by and large is taking the climate changing more seriously. For me the 'words of the year', prophetic, came from Bishop Justin in his Ordination Sermon: 'Climate change is a spiritual issue'.

Then there were the 'meetings', divine encounters with St James and All Saints folk in worship and personally being privileged to minister to God's people. For some there will have been the sad times, the partings through death and for others enduring ill health. Yet here also God is, through love and care and kindness.

As January comes there's time to reflect and as Mary, to ponder these things in our hearts. For me above all is the miracle of life. So, I conclude with phrases from the Collect:As we prepare to celebrate Jesus' birth make our hearts leap for joy at the sound of your word, and move us by your Holy Spirit to bless your wonderful works. Amen.