

The Visitation: Free at Last

St Philip's Anglican Church, O'Connor ACT Australia

The Reverend Canon Professor Scott Cowdell

Sermon for the 4th Sunday in Advent, Year C, 19 December 2021

+In the Name of the Father & of the Son & of the Holy Spirit. AMEN.

Today's Gospel meeting between two mothers and two unborn babies in a remote village tells us a lot about what God's like, about how God cares for us, about what to expect from God in the life of faith, and what not to expect.

It's not about patriarchal authority, it's not about the harsh way our world seems to work inside the Canberra bubble—or the Washington DC beltway. It's not about having to prove ourselves in the face of looming disapproval, which is what life's like for so many people, isn't it, whether they're life's winners or life's losers? Because, if we have to appease an angry God, if we have to repress and deny ourselves in the grip of a harsh discipline, if we have to sacrifice our reason and our principles to maintain a fragile identity—along with the conspiracy theorists and everyone else who needs to be right at all costs—then we're in the grip of a terrible delusion. Sigmund Freud was right: the

demands that fitting in puts on us and that we internalise can become oppressive, and people typically associate that repression with God.

But, friends, instead of all that, we're offered an alternative today in Advent. God is revealed in the friendship of these two women, making one into a prophet and the other into the mother of God. And God comes to us in these two babies, with one of them joining his mother in joyfully welcoming the other, nearly jumping out of his skin.

All our readings today are about joy, relief, return, liberation, and release from the burden of sin. Micah promises God's defeated people the restoration of their fortunes. The imagery is of a return to the golden age of King David, which is why we hear about Bethlehem Ephrathah the city of David. The promise to God's people is a winding back of all their historical misfortune, which was typically understood as God's punishment, as if it never happened. Likewise, our Hebrews reading announces an end to sacrificial religion, an end to the temple as a place of sacrifice for placating an angry God, because as Jesus offers himself, as Jesus steps up as our great sacrament of peace with God, we don't need that sort of religion anymore. The fact that today's subversive Gospel scene takes place in the house of Zechariah, a

Temple priest, underlines the point. God is turning that whole operation in a new direction.

And it's not as if Jesus has to placate an angry God in our place; it's not as if Jesus becomes our 'get out of jail free' card, as you'll hear in more and more Anglican pulpits these days. It's not as if Jesus works the system on our behalf. Because even if you're released from a Gestapo or Stasi or KGB prison, you still live in a police state. No, instead, Jesus puts an end to that system. Jesus' innocent death exposes that system, and his resurrection is God's decisive protest against that system.

Easter is the Magnificat fully enacted, with the love of God unseating the mighty, those who profit from the system, in order to exalt the humble and meek. And here they are today, the humble and meek: blessed Mary and the prophet Elizabeth, with their two remarkable sons. Both of them will die violently, though *not* to please an angry God. Rather, they'll die so that hearts turned against God and against themselves and against others can be enlightened and broken open.

So, friends, life with God isn't about punishment, about having to prove ourselves worthy, about obeying the law as a marker of our superior status, about conformity to whatever social code or protest identity or whatever it is that we rely on to feel good about ourselves. Instead, we

can learn to accept ourselves and then trust ourselves to the gentle process of conversion, because God accepts us, and that acceptance begins our transformation.

These mothers and babies, representing the very antithesis of posturing, bullying, self-justifying swagger, and the opposite of harsh judgements, show us what God brings to birth in Jesus Christ. Elizabeth sees it, her unborn son John the Baptist sees it, and it's our Christian birthright to see it. And when we do see it, the only possible response is joy. We can leave behind the anxieties of bad religion, of bad psychology, and of a perennially bad conscience. We can leave all these poisonous things to the many people who so assiduously cultivate them, and who can't seem to live without them.

The Lord be with you ...