



Week 4

The story of Mary and Elizabeth is perhaps one of the greatest stories of friendship in the Bible. Two pregnant women meet, perhaps after many years, and rejoice in their good news.

After the angel Gabriel departs, Mary sets out on the first of many long and difficult journeys she was to take during her lifetime. We have no idea how she managed, where she found the money, if she traveled alone (which would have been very unusual and probably dangerous in those days), how long the journey took, or if she suffered from morning sickness along the way. All we can be sure of is that her desire to be with her cousin, Elizabeth, must have been very strong.

Married to Zechariah for many years, Elizabeth had waited for a baby in vain. Now, in her old age, she had conceived a son (Lk 1:36). At six months pregnant, Elizabeth goes out to meet Mary and immediately recognises that her cousin has been blessed in an extraordinary way and that the child in her womb, only a tiny thing, is also blessed. Then Elizabeth utters the famous words that we pray in the Hail Mary:

Blessed art thou among women
And blessed is the fruit of thy womb Jesus (Lk 1:41).

Elizabeth was the first to recognise the awesome role, and indeed burden, placed on Mary, who was to become the mother of God. She knew by the way her own unborn child leaped in her womb. John was six months older than Jesus; he went out into the world and paved the way for Jesus, and was put to death before Jesus. But this exchange between the two women – cousins and friends – tells us that John was heralding Jesus to the world before he was even born. These four – two women and two boys, as yet unborn – are united by the strongest of bonds: the bonds of friendship and of blood.

In the first reading today, the prophet Micah announces that the small tribe which settled in the rural town of Bethlehem will produce the ruler of Israel. Wonderful

things can emerge from the most unexpected sources; and so a young, Jewish, unmarried woman became mother of God and remains one of the most inspiring people not only in the Christian scriptures but in the 2000 years since. In Mary we can see the effect of what happens when someone allows the promise of God to shape her whole life; not in a passive way, but because she says 'yes'.

At Christmas we celebrate Jesus as the kept promise of God, announced through the prophet Micah so long ago. He will fulfil all that has gone before and give new meaning to all that has yet to come. This is the dual sense of Advent: *adventus* – both 'here' and 'yet to come'.

We close the Advent season knowing that it is often through our own imperfect relationships that we witness something of God's presence in our lives. Family and friendship are a wonderful glimpse of the love of God. Where there is love, there is God, for God is love (1 Jn 4:8).

The imminent birth of Jesus in the humblest of circumstances reminds us that God came into our world not as a rich and powerful ruler, but as a newborn infant. Out of love for us, God became a human person in Jesus, to lead us to our best selves, to one another and to God. There is nothing sentimental in this. In fact, it both challenges and enables us to participate fully in the wonder of Christmas and the hope and joy which the Christ child brings. [618]