

‘The visit and the announcement’

Grace be with you and peace from God, our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ

*Rejoice, daughter of Zion! I am coming, I shall make my dwelling among you,
says the Lord. – Zech.2,10*

Collect:

*Heavenly Father, you chose the Virgin Mary, full of grace, to be the mother of our
Lord and Saviour. Fill us with your grace, that in all things we may embrace your
will, and with her rejoice in your salvation; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who
lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. AME*

Joy has dawned upon the world

1 Joy has dawned upon the world,
promised from creation:

God’s salvation now unfurled,
hope for every nation.

Not with fanfares from above,
not with scenes of glory,
but a humble gift of love:

Jesus, born of Mary.

2 Sounds of wonder fill the sky
with the songs of angels,
as the mighty Prince of Life
shelters in a stable.

Hands that set each star in place
shaped the earth in darkness,
cling now to a mother’s breast,

vulnerable and helpless.

3 Shepherds bow before the Lamb,
gazing at the glory;
gifts of men from distant lands
prophesy the story.

Gold, a king is born today,
incense, God is with us,
myrrh, His death will make a way,
and by His blood He’ll win us.

4 Son of Adam, Son of heaven,
given as a ransom,
reconciling God and man,
Christ our mighty champion!
What a Saviour, what a friend,
once a babe in Bethlehem,
Now the Lord of history!

Reading: **Lk.1,39-45**

Dear friends

The reason that we today hear and know of a visit that took place so many years ago in the hills of Judea between two women of seemingly little account requires some explanation. We find it, of course, in the fact that the women involved were both expecting, that the child in particular that was growing inside one of them – Mary – was not just going to be of *some* consequence for a few, but was going to be of eternal consequence for all – through all the generations down to our own and beyond this to the one which shall be the last.

This visit, brought about by the expectation of the coming of this child, foreshadows and speaks of the visit that his coming involves you and me and all of us in, in which we shall ourselves be the intended addressee of the Lord's favour, shall ourselves know the joy of having new life growing inside us!

Yes, things of great consequence were the order of this visit in the hills of Judea all those years ago, things of the Almighty who has undone the might of the ruling and the powerful, has sent the rich away empty, but has lifted up the humble (see Mary's song of praise – Lk.1,46-55!).

From the events that in the course of a few short years would follow this visit, we know that if the ruling powers (Herod; Jewish leadership) had known of it, they would have sought to make sure that this new life would not see the light of day. They would have realised then, as they came to realise later, that if this new life were allowed to be, its weakness, the humility of its form, its purity, would rule to make the weak strong and bring down the powers that drive the aims of the powerful.

But this matter of "had they seen/had they known" and this matter of the fear in the response of the powerful and the ruling to this child, tells us something of great importance: that the ability to see this child and know what is given us in him and to receive him, is not in our power or by our power unaided – it is by *faith*. In fact, all human highhandedness before God, by which man serves himself, is put to an end and is judged in the coming of this child. And faith alone will see, because faith is where the humble dwell and where those who live by it shall be (the) righteous (ones).

Dear friends, let us look at this visit that Mary paid to Elizabeth and see therefore some of what it tells about faith and what it receives through the coming Saviour.

First we notice that Mary 'hurried'; we are not told that she 'went' but that she 'hurried'. There was an expectant urgency to her undertaking. The new life that was growing inside her filled her with a longing to praise and to thank God, recognising what He had done for her (!), and to share what the angel had told her about the child she was carrying. But faith will do likewise. The new life that shall grow inside us when we receive this child will fill the heart in such a way that it overflows in praise and thanks towards God and with a desire to give of itself to others and share what was received. Let us learn as we look to the coming of the Saviour to expect *this* and to seek it with urgency as his gift to us and his life in us.

Then there is Elizabeth, the child in her leaping for joy at Mary's greeting, and her being filled with the Holy Spirit. But what this tells us is that faith, in receiving Jesus, will give rise to joy: The child to be born comes to bring joy! "*Don't be afraid,*" says the angel announcing his coming, "*I bring you good news that will cause **great joy** for all the people. Today in the town of David **a Saviour** has been*

born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord.” It is the joy of salvation! Not the joys of the world which as Jesus teaches in the parable of the sower end up suffocating life, but this:

The joy of one lost and given up on who is searched for and found and wants to share his joy with others; the joy of one wounded who is being healed; the joy of one under the sentence of death because of his guilt who is given not just reprieve but full pardon and is restored to the fellowship of the righteous; the joy of one burdened and weary who is given rest; the joy of one at war with himself, with others and with God who is given peace such as he could not find and the world cannot give; the joy of one under the fear of death who is given eternal life. And where is this joy but through the coming from God of the One who reconciles the world to God through taking away the sins of the world in his own death on the cross and procures the forgiveness of sins for us all. The nature of this joy is our return to God – to know Him, to know the love the Father has for us, and so have fellowship with Him and with one another. And what does this joy do but seek to honour the author of it in thankfulness towards him and love towards others?

Of it we learn by the words of Jesus to his disciples: *“If you keep my commands, you will remain in my love just as I have kept my Father’s commands and remain in his love. I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete.”* (Jn.15,11) Or in John’s first epistle: *“We proclaim to you what we have seen and heard, so that you also may have fellowship with us. And our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ. We write this to make our joy complete.”* (1Jn.1,3-4)

Dear friends, the life that grows inside Mary is conceived by the Holy Spirit – John’s leaping for joy at his coming is a sign that he is the Son of God. The new life in all who receive this coming Saviour in faith is also conceived by the Holy Spirit, it is the power through the Son of God to become children of God (Jn.1,12!).

And does not the visit of Mary’s to Elizabeth show us that the Holy Spirit of God who through the coming of the Son of God – heaven’s greeting of mercy and grace! – in all who receive him conceives new life – his life! -, does so through that which brings the Son of God into the world: Mary’s womb, that is: the Word made flesh, that is: the Word of witness:

“That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked at and our hands have touched – this we proclaim concerning the Word of life. The life appeared; we have seen it and testify to it, and we proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and has appeared to us.” (1Jn.1,1-2)

May the Holy Spirit fill us, and all, as we hear the word of the coming Saviour, that we may know the joy of receiving him and of having what He is: God-with-us, sonship, forgiveness of our sins and eternal life. AMEN

Lord God, you bless all the world in the richest possible way through your Son who by his coming into our world and assuming our flesh has become the fulfilment of all your promises, the forgiveness of our sins, the gift of life. If we are rich in ourselves before you, we are sent away with nothing of his; if we are poor and have nothing in ourselves that we would boast before you, we are given all of it. How wonderful and vast is the depth of your wisdom in judgment and grace! Give us, we pray, as we await his coming to believe that the promises, which you most certainly fulfil, are all owned by Jesus and through him by all who are his. Amen

- time of prayer / intercession – [what concerns we have on our heart we pour out before God and seek in thanksgiving the gifts of His blessings;]

we ask to discern His judgments and for a spirit of understanding and repentance, for mercy and an end to the spiritual ignorance whereby we fail to reject and abhor sin and wickedness;

we pray that Jesus may be honoured in the hearts of all who await his coming and hear his voice;

we pray that as John heard in Mary's greeting the coming of the Lord, so it may be heard in the proclamation of the gospel this Christmas time;

we plead for the lost, the broken, the sick, the lonely, the abandoned, the persecuted, the suffering...;

we pray for a resolution to the migrant crisis on our borders and elsewhere, for a mitigation of the tensions between nations that might lead to war, for diplomatic efforts to bring peace to areas of conflict, for the victims of famine and of war;

we pray for our friends, brothers and sisters in Siliguri; for boldness in the church in its task to serve God, for a renewed resolve to obey his will;

we think of the victims and the ongoing trouble of the pandemic in our country and around the world and pray for those who care for the ill and for those tasked with keeping the people safe and for faith and courage...;

we pray for the authorities and those in leadership, for respect for the rule of law, for our communities and those who serve its welfare;

we thank God for His guiding and keeping, for all the ways in which we discern his helping hand; we pray:]

'Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us today our daily bread. And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one. For yours is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, for ever. Amen

Look forward in hope to the coming of your Saviour, prepare the way for Christ your Lord; welcome him with love and faith when he comes in glory.

And the blessing of God almighty, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit be among you and remain with you. AMEN
