

Readings: *Zephaniah 3:14 – 18 OR Romans 12:9 – 16; Canticle Isaiah 12:2 – 6; Luke 1: 39 – 56.*

The visit of Mary to her cousin Elizabeth is recorded by Saint Luke in the passage which provides the Gospel Reading for today. The earliest liturgical celebration of the Visitation in the Western Church seems to have been on the Ember Friday of Advent, forming (with the Annunciation and the preaching of John the Baptist) part of the preparation for Christmas. It was not until the late fourteenth century that a separate feast-day was added to the calendar. But reflection of the event was widespread before this – both in art and in popular devotion.

Among the aspects of the event which have provoked reflection are these:

Mary shows her charity and her zeal by going to be with her aged cousin – she *went as quickly as she could*. Saint Ambrose says that this was not because she doubted Gabriel's words but *because she was overjoyed with desire, eager to fulfil a duty of piety, and impelled by gladness*. Elizabeth recognizes Mary as *the mother of my Lord* – which means 'as the Mother of the King' – a high status in Israel as in other cultures.

She calls the child in Mary's womb *blessed*, and Mary herself *blessed among women*.

The prophet-to-be in Elizabeth's womb *leapt for joy* at the presence of the king-to-be in Mary's womb.

Mary is blessed because she *believed that the promise made her by the Lord would be fulfilled*.

She is the first to believe – the first Christian disciple.

Mary's response to these events is her song of praise in which she praises God, first, for *the great things* he has done in her and for her. *He has looked upon his lowly hand maid, and all generations will call her blessed*. And her song continues with praise for what Bede calls "The general blessings with which God never ceases from all eternity to come to men's aid".

These 'general blessings' are, in fact, a revolutionary programme for the total reversal of worldly values. *The proud of heart*, the rulers (including presidents and prime ministers as well as *princes*) and *the rich* will, under God's new dispensation give way to *the lowly* and *the hungry*.

Enough here for a lifetime of reflection, to which we may be moved by the daily singing or reciting of Mary's *Magnificat* during Evening Prayer.