

## **The Feast of the Visitation and Patronal Festival, St Mary's, Woodbridge.**

It is a great pleasure to be with you this morning for your patronal festival and as we celebrate together the Feast of the Visitation. The Visitation is one of those feasts in the churches year that is often overlooked but, it is genuinely one of my favourite celebrations in the whole calendar.

What we celebrate today is the first time the good news of God's unfolding plan for the world in Jesus Christ is told by one person to another. And, although it's a quiet, intimate moment, it is, nonetheless a moment that is packed full of insights that warrants our close attention.

And that's what I want to do this morning, to just step back and remind ourselves of some of the foundational elements of our faith that we see so clearly in the feast of the visitation - one of the earliest moments in the Christian story....

I'm going to give you two reasons why I think the visitation is so important and why this is one of the best days for any church to hold a patronal festival!

The first thing I want to pick out from reading this morning is to look at the kind of people God uses.

Here we have a pregnant, unmarried teenager and an old woman who has no children.

Two people, who, by the standards of their day would not have been taken seriously. Indeed, earlier in Luke chapter 1, Elizabeth describes herself as being in a *disgraceful* state, having never had children.

The fact that she refers to this tell us something of the pain she must have carried for something that was beyond her control. In her day, there would have been no attempt to view Elizabeth situation with understanding or compassion but instead she would have been viewed with suspicion.

Equally troubling was an unmarried woman who was pregnant.

Right at the centre of this scene we have two women who would have been the cause of gossip, judgemental conversations and cynical conclusions.

But it is to these two people that God looks to and whom God takes as his first recruits in the unfolding plan of salvation, which you will notice Mary and Elizabeth 'get it' without hesitation.

Yes, by the standards of the day, they were disgraceful but forever in the Christian faith they stand as shining examples of lives full of trust in God.

The people God gives the most important task to are those people are least expecting. And we, God's church, would do well to remember this.

We must be alert to the voices and experiences of those we would be tempted to easily dismiss.

The moment we ignore someone on account of snap judgments based on standards of our own making – standards which we usually fail to live up to ourselves - alarm bells should be ringing.

Time and time again our faith always seem to spring up in places where no one expects:

The Visitation calls us to reflect, who are you least likely to pay attention? And conversely, who therefore, might be the most likely person to be the agent of God's will here in Woodbridge?

The second thing I want to remind you of today, on your patronal festival, is that the feast of the Visitation is a story about evangelism.

When we read this story, we are left in no doubt that Mary and Elizabeth are filled with excitement and anticipation. They really do believe that God is at work in their lives. But let's look at the context.

In Luke chapter 1, the first person to know God is on manoeuvres is Zachariah, Elizabeth's husband – who is spoken to by Gabriel. Mary, likewise, is spoken to by the same angel. But Elizabeth is the first to hear the news through another person – and what does Mary say to her?

Does she knock on the door and say, "Elizabeth, can you spare me a few minutes because I want to tell you about Jesus Christ, your personal Lord and Saviour?"

NO.

She turns up and says hello. She doesn't need to say anything. Her presence and the baby in her womb is enough.

As a church, we have fallen into this trap of thinking that unless we are proclaiming in the streets and turning every parish church into a particular brand of "mega church" then we're not doing evangelism right. And that's rubbish.

Of course, we all want to see the Church grow. But I think it's hugely telling that the first time the good news of Christ Jesus is taken out into the world, Mary shares her faith to just one person.

AND - given what we have already said about Elizabeth's questionable status in that society, I wonder how many visitors she received? How many offers of

help with her pregnancy came her way? I'm going to speculate, not many. But Mary – Mary – she shows up.

It's Mary's presence, her willingness to show up for someone who, I suspect, didn't have a lot of friends or support at a time when they were most needed. That's what comes first and then and only then do her words about the outworkings of God in her life follow.

I think we would do well to remember the sequence of events here when we think about how we, as Christians today, might want to share the good news of our faith with the world.

In my life I have found that when people experience even the smallest acts of kindness and love – it's then that they are much more inclined to want to know a bit more about the faith that motivates me.

So, friends, let us cherish this celebration of The Visitation, that great feast of the Christian year and as we give thanks for the life of this church over many centuries – let's look ahead with Mary as our guide....

I pray that each of us will be alert to the outworkings of God though the people we might least expect

That we **will** have the confidence to share the Good News of Christ

But, in doing so we will be like Mary, and that we will already be preaching the gospel through the actions of our lives, so the hearts and minds of the people we seek to serve will already be prepared well before we have uttered even a single word.

AMEN.

The Rev'd Canon Michael Robinson

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