**Living in an age of uncertainty** Luke 1:39-55 Sunday 19 December 2021

We all enter this Christmas season with a much greater appreciation of what it is like to live in the midst of uncertainty. The new challenge of the omricon variant, increasing new infections throughout Australia, ongoing hospitalisations and deaths, and then the devastating tragedy in Devonport all highlight the uncertainty which pervades life. What does it mean **to live as God’s people** in this time

Much of life in Australia has been predictable and secure for many years, until 2020. The powerful and affluent have particularly been able to live in security. The pandemic however has created a more even playing field in our society. Money and power have been unable to guarantee personal safety. The restrictions of the pandemic have applied to all.

This period in time has been particularly concerning for many who have been pregnant. Would they and their unborn children be safe during their pregnancies, at the time of birth and as they enter a world grappling with a pandemic?

Pregnancy, and particularly a first pregnancy is always a time of great uncertainty. This would also be true for Mary and Elizabeth. These two women were experiencing not only their first pregnancies, but pregnancies which were characterised by Divine activity, angelic visitations, miraculous elements, and declarations of immensely significant roles for these two babies.

**Supportive communities**

It is therefore not surprising, that Mary would go and see Elizabeth. Perhaps she needed the reassurance of seeing that what the angel had said about Elizabeth was true, so that she could also trust what she had been told by the angel.

The journey of Mary is notable however, as unmarried women did not do this, they stayed in the seclusion of their own homes until they were married, they certainly did not normally travel alone. It appears that the journey was at Mary’sown instigation which likewise is very unusual from what we understand of the culture of her time. [[1]](#footnote-1)

We recognise that the support of others is a vital part of how we live as humans. We are created as social beings and sometimes we **need reassurance** from others, particularly in times of uncertainty. Surrounding ourselves with people who can encourage us is vital, we have seen that being lived out in the pandemic. The interaction between Mary and Elizabeth was a positive, affirming encounter.

**Personal Perspectives**

From their meeting we are given insights into their personal reflections on the faithfulness of God to them as individuals. In the dialogue, Elizabeth is initially honoured by Mary’s greeting to her as the older of the two, and as one who is descended from the Aaronic line and married to a priest. However, the tone of the dialogue quickly changes, when Elizabeth experiences the baby in her womb leap at Mary’s greeting, and she is filled with the Holy Spirit. She comes to the realisation that she needs to give honour to Mary. Elizabeth places herself in the servant role towards Mary, she chooses to show genuine humility which will be an ongoing mark of Christian faith.[[2]](#footnote-2) Both of these women show humility towards God. Mary recognises that her favoured status is a gift of God’s grace alone. She declares that all that is within her, her spirit and soul is engaged in worshipping God.

Elizabeth declares that Mary is blessedbecause of her faith in God’s word to her. Mary had been prepared to place herself in the hands of God and allow God to work through her. Her love for God is apparent throughout her song of praise. Though much was uncertain Mary kept focusing on God, what God had done and would do. The verbs she uses are active and point to a sense of certainty in God’s actions.

In uncertain times God remains active, God was the source of Mary’s strength, she could affirm that God was active for her and for her people, doing a new, a somewhat incomprehensible thing and using her in the midst of that.

**The larger picture - What has God done for us all over time**

These two women and their pregnancies points us to the ongoing faithfulness of God. Elizabeth reminds us of Abraham and Sarah, Israel’s patriarchs, and their experience of the birth of a son despite Sarah’s age. Their son serves a pivotal role in God’s plans for Israel. Likewise, the birth and ministry of John will point to the reality that God has remained faithful to Israel, despite their faithlessness, and that God is now doing a new thing through Jesus.

Mary affirms the work of God towards Israel, and the structure of her affirmations highlights God’s work in the past, present and the future. [[3]](#footnote-3)She draws on various psalms as she recalled God’s faithfulness and acknowledged God’s ongoing activity. The psalms sustained Israel and enabled them to keep moving forward despite uncertainties. Mary speaks of magnifying the Lord. Her image of God has been increased and clarified. Her increased experience and understanding of God, prompts her to want to share this praise of God with others.

Public affirmations of praise to God, marked the life of Israel. Mary makes declarations of praise to God and describes reasons for praising God. Her song emphasises both the might and the mercy of God in the context of this new, unfolding, decisive act of God in human history through Jesus.[[4]](#footnote-4) Praising God together or privately likewise helps us to refocus and recognise that God is present, faithful and active now as in the past.

 Her words point to the long awaited coming of God’s kingdom of justice and peace. However, it will unfold in a vastly unexpected way. Initially through the birth of a baby, but no ordinary baby, this “child king” who is never seen to become a king in the fashion which we would expect. Yet even before his birth Elizabeth honours this baby as her Lord.[[5]](#footnote-5)

Mary’s song challenges natural assumptions. “The overthrow of the powerful [will] not come about by the mounting up of the weak in rebellion but through the coming of God in the weakness of a child”.[[6]](#footnote-6)

Mary’s song highlights three groups who God deals with: the powerful, the proud and the rich. Over against these persons Mary’s song honours the lowly and the hungry, as God acts on their behalf.

The coming of Jesus provides a way for all people to reconnect with God. Power, success, influence, wealth and the respect of others are enticing forces in our world. The desire for independence is a powerful driver in our communities. However COVID has made us aware that none of these things can suppress our vulnerability in the face of a pandemic. We have come to recognise new elements of our own powerlessness.

Faced with this sense of powerlessness, some have rediscovered a life giving relationship with God. The trauma of these times has shaken our self-reliance and highlighted our interconnectedness with all humanity. For some it has given opportunity to consider some of the big questions of life. Where do I find meaning in life? What gives me hope? How can I deal with my own failures? What is my purpose in life?

Mary’s song reminds us of our need for God. She speaks about her “spirit rejoicing in God [her] Saviour”.[[7]](#footnote-7) We all experience significant needs, needs which surpass our own strength and resources, needs which highlight our powerlessness. In the coming of Jesus we are invited to recognise in this baby the One who can meet our deepest needs, the promised Saviour who can deal with the turmoil of our lives and set us free.

“To confess that God is our Saviour means that we will not look to some other power for salvation from the chaos we have created.” Neither technology, nor humanitarian efforts, social progress nor legislated reforms, education nor psychological insights will deliver us from meaningless lives, self centredness, greed, apathy, and exploiting our own advantages. God may use a variety of factors to illuminate our minds and provoke action, but “the basis of our trust, hope and commitment should be clear: God is our Saviour.”[[8]](#footnote-8)

1. Joel Green, *Luke,* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm B. Eerdmans, 1997) 94-96 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Green, *Luke,* 94 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Fred B. Craddock, *Luke,* (Louisville, Kentucky: John Knox Press, 1990) 30 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Joel Green, *Luke,* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm B. Eerdmans, 1997) 104 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Luke 1:43 NRSV [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. R. Alan Culpepper, “Gospel of Luke: Introduction, Commentary and Reflections” in Leander E. Keck, *The New Interpreters Bible: A Commentary in Twelve Volumes*, (Kentucky: Abingdon Press, 1995) 55 [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Luke 1: 47 NRSV [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Culpepper, “Gospel of Luke: Introduction, Commentary and Reflections” 56 [↑](#footnote-ref-8)