

## **Notes from Sermon given by Ian Stackhouse – December 20<sup>th</sup> 2009 Luke 1:26-56 Mary and Elizabeth**

Ian began by recounting the times when he had been present at the birth of each of his sons. One of the most amazing things in pregnancy is to feel the baby moving, and one of his sons used to kick so hard that you almost see the foot and count the toes. So it is amazing in the Christmas story that when Mary, newly pregnant by the Holy Spirit, went to see her cousin Elizabeth who herself was six months pregnant, the baby in Elizabeth's womb didn't just kick, or move, but leaped!

In fact it is the same word used of King David when he danced before the Ark of the Covenant – leaping and dancing. The baby in the womb recognises that he is in the presence not of any ordinary person, but in the presence of the living God. The image of the invisible God, the Word made flesh, the one whom John will point to when they are both grown up and say 'Behold the lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world'. This miraculous birth will bring to an end the judgement that hangs over the house of Israel, and herald the fulfilment of all those prophecies about forgiveness, mercy and the reign of God.

No wonder Elizabeth exclaims 'Blessed are you among women and blessed is the child you bear'. She says this not because she is a Roman Catholic and wants to venerate Mary – this is something that Luke speaks out against – no, it is because under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit she realises that this baby that Mary is carrying is 'my Lord'. Elizabeth is pouring our blessings on Mary for believing what the angel has said, receiving the Word and trusting that Word.

Mary responds by opening her mouth to sing what we now know as The Magnificat. Rather than what we are used to in our cathedrals, it probably had a Hebrew rhythm, clapping and a beat. What she sings is the gospel, the Gospel before the Gospel; 30 weeks before Bethlehem and 30 years before Calvary. Mary is so certain of what God has done, that the song is written in the past tense, because she knows it will happen.

For sure she will feel her own grief, she will lose him for three days when he is 12, and at 30 he will be thought to be mad, and at 33 he will die on a cross and be wrapped in another cloth in a tomb. But three days later we have The Great Reversal: history will be turned on its head, the great and those who are proud in their thoughts will be brought down low, and those who look to Him for grace will be raised up.

Mary goes home, but that is not the end of the joy. There are many references to 'joy' in Luke and Acts. Joy is the dominant response when the gospel happens in particular when the angel appears to the shepherds: "Do not be afraid, for I bring you good tidings of great joy..."

The dominant note of being a Christian is Joy, not in a frivolous sense, but exuberant, over-the-top joy, because you have been saved from your sins! We should loudly grieve when we are sad and laugh loudly when we are happy. Put away those average emotions. God has taken miserable, ungrateful, whingeing, complaining, self-centred, deceiving, arrogant good-for-nothings which is what we are, and lavished mercy on us, and given us what we don't deserve – forgiveness and cleansing. Sing in whatever style you like!

If you lose the sense of adventure and risk, then this will rob you of all joy, and you will live average lives, worshipping an average God, with an average hope of heaven.

Rip all that away this Christmas, and worship a joyful God. The Dominican monks make a lot of happiness, joy and laughter, which is not to say that we don't carry pain, but even in the midst of our greatest trials then the joy of the Lord is our strength.

So let's get outrageously drunk on the new wine of the Gospel!