

ADVENT REFLECTION

THREE WOMEN WAITING

Hymn **Come, thou long-expected Jesus 100**

Advent is waiting time. We are focused on something which is going to happen. It happens in the wintertime, in the cold, in the dark. A baby grows silently in the dark, inside its mother. Everyone in the family waits. They get things ready for when the baby is born. They make plans, for when the baby is born. But until the baby is born, they just have to wait.

This afternoon, I want to wait with three women who are part of this story. They are all in Luke's Gospel. The first is Anna.

ANNA

Anna is not the same person as Mary's mother Anne. She is much the oldest of our three women, probably in her eighties, and she makes only a brief appearance in the Gospel of Luke; she also appears last of our three women, and indeed, after the baby has been born, but she has been waiting for him, living in the Temple, for years and years, so we are looking at her first.

After the birth of Jesus, at the prescribed time, Mary and Joseph bring their baby to the Temple, and they meet Simeon, a good man whom the Holy Spirit has sent there just at the right time, who recognises the baby as the Messiah he has been waiting for, all his life. Simeon blesses the little family, and warns Mary of the grief she will suffer. But Simeon is not the only person to recognise the importance of what is happening. Anna is there too.

Reading Luke 2 36-38

At the end of the reading :The word of the Lord.

Response : Thanks be to God.

Anna knows immediately, after all these years of waiting, who this baby is. Like Simeon, she has spent her life waiting and praying. The Holy Spirit has brought her also to the Temple at that very hour, on that very day to encounter this family, and see this precious baby. She praises God and thanks him; she tells everyone she meets about him. Sadly we do not have any of her words, because women's words tend not to be included in the Bible, so let us use Simeon's prayer.

**Now, Lord, you have kept your word;
let your servant go in peace.
With my own eyes I have seen the salvation
which you have prepared in the sight of every people:
a light to reveal you to the nations
and the glory of your people Israel.**

**Glory be to the Father
and to the Son
and to the Holy Spirit,
as it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be,
world without end, Amen.**

ELIZABETH

The second woman I want to wait with this afternoon is Elizabeth. She is named as a major character right at the beginning of Luke's Gospel; she is named and placed into context. She and her husband, the priest Zechariah, are good people. They have been married a long time, they are quite old, and they have never had any children. One day Zechariah's life changes utterly : an angel appears when he is at the altar and tells him that his wife Elizabeth will bear him a son. The angel also gives more details about the baby, who is to be called John and who will have a great task given to him by God, to prepare the people for the Lord's arrival.

Zechariah is sceptical, and then the angel (Gabriel) tells him that from now on he will not be able to speak until these prophecies come true. He goes mutely home and within a short time, Elizabeth is pregnant.

Let's think about Elizabeth. She is in a line of holy, childless women in the Bible. Like Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel and Hannah, she has always longed for a child and yet has been the person who has always been blamed for there being none. Now she is getting older, so a child is increasingly unlikely; but her confidence in God is absolute.

Reading Luke 1 24-25, 39-45.

At the end of the reading :The word of the Lord.

Response : Thanks be to God.

In due course, Elizabeth gives birth to a son amid great rejoicing. Zechariah is still unable to speak. The family comes to find out what name the baby will have. Surely he should be named after his father? But Elizabeth says no, he is to be called John (so Zechariah found some way to tell her in detail what the angel said). But she's only the baby's mother, what does she know, none of the family is called 'John', so they decide to check with Zechariah. They make signs to him, asking what he wants the baby to be called (he's not deaf, just mute, but this makes me smile, because it's such an accurate observation of how people deal with disabled people!). Zechariah asks for something to write on, and writes, 'His name is John', and immediately he can speak again. Then he is filled with the Holy Spirit, and gives us another great prayer. Let's say part of it together :

**Blessed be the Lord, the God of Israel!
He has visited his people and redeemed them.
He has raised up for us a mighty saviour
in the house of David his servant,
as he promised by the lips of holy men,
those who were his prophets from of old.
He will give light to those in darkness,
those who dwell in the shadow of death,
and guide us into the way of peace.**

**Glory be to the Father
and to the Son
and to the Holy Spirit,
as it was in the beginning,
is now, and ever shall be,
world without end, Amen.**

MARY

Our third woman who waits is of course Mary. She falls between the other two women in Luke's narrative and to begin with we are given much less information about her than about either Elizabeth or Anna. John and Mark don't even tell the story of Jesus' birth, and keep referring to 'the mother of Jesus' as though they aren't even sure of her name. Matthew names Mary on her first appearance, and then mostly refers to her just through her relationship with Jesus, as 'his mother'.

We think we know a lot about Mary because she is so important, but in fact we know very little, just that she is a young girl, betrothed to a man named Joseph (whose ancestry is given at length). Luke tells us that the angel Gabriel (the same who spoke to Zechariah) comes to visit her, out of the blue, as you might say. And her life, too, is changed utterly.

Reading Luke 1 26-38

At the end of the reading :The word of the Lord.

Response : Thanks be to God.

Let us echo the angel's words : **Hail Mary...**

Let us think about Mary, as the angel departs from her. What can she be thinking? We can only imagine. We know how brave she was, from her response to the angel; but even so, it must have been difficult for her over the next days and weeks. Who can she talk to? Who might understand? But the last thing the angel says to her has given her a clue. Our third woman, Mary, goes off to visit our second, Elizabeth, and it is at this meeting that finally we hear their own voices, we have their own words.

Reading Luke 1 46-56

At the end of the reading :The word of the Lord.

Response : Thanks be to God.

Imagine how comforting it must have been for Mary, to discover that Elizabeth already knew what she would have needed to find words to explain. Elizabeth speaks to her in loud and joyful words, which give us the next line of the Hail Mary, after the angel's greeting. And then Mary speaks, a beautiful outpouring of faith and love, rooted in her knowledge of the mothers of Israel, and the psalms. She brings all these strands together to weave her amazing Magnificat, and you can hear her character and personality in every line. Let's say it together :

**My soul glorifies the Lord,
and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour.
He looks on his servant in her lowliness;
henceforth all ages will call me blessed.**

**The Almighty works marvels for me.
Holy his name!
His mercy is from age to age,
on those who fear him.
He puts forth his arm in strength**

**and scatters the proud-hearted.
He casts the mighty from their thrones
and raises the lowly.**

**He fills the starving with good things,
sends the rich away empty.
He protects Israel, his servant,
remembering his mercy,
the mercy promised to our fathers,
to Abraham and his sons for ever.**

**Glory be to the Father
and to the Son,
and to the Holy Spirit,
as it was in the beginning,
is now, and ever shall be,
world without end, Amen.**

The next three months are happy and peaceful, as the two women spend time together. Then Mary goes home.

Elizabeth has her baby and Zechariah's speech is restored. But once she returns from Elizabeth's house, Mary has to go on another journey, because of the Roman census. She sets out on this ninety-mile journey, with Joseph and (traditionally) the family donkey. This trip must have been hard, because the waiting is nearly over, and the baby will be born soon.

But for now, we need to keep waiting.

Hymn : It came upon the midnight clear

**1. It came upon the midnight clear,
That glorious song of old,
From angels bending near the earth
To touch their harps of gold:
'Peace on the earth, goodwill to men,
From heaven's all-gracious King!'
The world in solemn stillness lay
To hear the angels sing.**

**2. Still through the cloven skies they come,
With peaceful wings unfurled;
And still their heavenly music floats
O'er all the weary world:
Above its sad and lonely plains
They bend on hovering wing;
And ever o'er its Babel-sounds
The blessed angels sing.**

**3. Yet with the woes of sin and strife
The world has suffered long;
Beneath the angel-strains have rolled
Two thousand years of wrong;
And man, at war with man, hears not
The love-song which they bring:
O hush the noise, ye men of strife,
And hear the angels sing.**

**4. For lo, the days are hastening on,
By prophet-bards foretold,
When with the ever-circling years
Comes round the age of gold;
When peace shall over all the earth
Its ancient splendours fling,
And the whole world give back the song
Which now the angels sing.**

FINAL BLESSING (if one of the priests is there)

READINGS from the RSV
Revised Standard Version Catholic Edition (RSVCE)

ANNA :

A reading from the Gospel of St Luke, chapter 2: 36-38

And there was a prophetess, Anna, the daughter of Phan'u-el, of the tribe of Asher; she was of a great age, having lived with her husband seven years from her virginity, and as a widow till she was eighty-four. She did not depart from the temple, worshipping with fasting and prayer night and day. And coming up at that very hour she gave thanks to God, and spoke of him to all who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem.

The word of the Lord.

Thanks be to God.

ELIZABETH :

A reading from the Gospel of St Luke, chapter 1: 24-25, 39-45

After these days his wife Elizabeth conceived, and for five months she hid herself, saying, "Thus the Lord has done to me in the days when he looked on me, to take away my reproach among men."

In those days Mary arose and went with haste into the hill country, to a city of Judah, and she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. And when Elizabeth heard the greeting of Mary, the babe leaped in her womb; and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit and she exclaimed with a loud cry, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb! And why is this granted me, that the mother of my Lord should come to me? For behold, when the voice of your greeting came to my ears, the babe in my womb leaped for joy. And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfilment of what was spoken to her from the Lord."

The word of the Lord.

Thanks be to God.

MARY :

(1) A reading from St Luke, chapter 1:26-38

In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent from God to a city of Galilee named Nazareth, to a virgin betrothed to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David; and the virgin's name was Mary. And he came to her and said, "Hail, full of grace, the Lord is with you!" But she was greatly troubled at the saying, and considered in her mind what sort of greeting this might be. And the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favour with God. And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High; and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his father David,

and he will reign over the house of Jacob for ever;
and of his kingdom there will be no end.”

And Mary said to the angel, “How can this be, since I have no husband?”

And the angel said to her,

“The Holy Spirit will come upon you,
and the power of the Most High will overshadow you;
therefore the child to be born will be called holy,
the Son of God.

And behold, your kinswoman Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son; and this is the sixth month with her who was called barren. For with God nothing will be impossible.” And Mary said, “Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word.” And the angel departed from her.

The word of the Lord.

Thanks be to God.

(2) A reading from St Luke, chapter 1: 46-56

And Mary said,

“My soul magnifies the Lord,
and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour,
for he has regarded the low estate of his handmaiden.
For behold, henceforth all generations will call me blessed;
for he who is mighty has done great things for me,
and holy is his name.

And his mercy is on those who fear him
from generation to generation.

He has shown strength with his arm,
he has scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts,
he has put down the mighty from their thrones,
and exalted those of low degree;
he has filled the hungry with good things,
and the rich he has sent empty away.

He has helped his servant Israel,
in remembrance of his mercy,
as he spoke to our fathers,
to Abraham and to his posterity for ever.”

And Mary remained with Elizabeth about three months, and returned to her home.

The word of the Lord.

Thanks be to God.