

Homily (notes) from Canon Philip Dyson  
**19th December 2021 - 4th Sunday in Advent**

Readings (Year C): 1st: Micah 5:1-4. Psalm: 79. 2nd: Hebrews 10:5-10. Gospel: Luke 1:39-45.

It is an old tradition that St Luke, as well as being a doctor, was also a portrait painter. Certainly he can do that in words, as we know from his gospel. I was quite taken therefore when a kind parishioner gave me a copy of an article from the Financial Times Life and Arts page by Enuma Okoro. Enuma was reflecting on today's gospel of the Visitation. She writes "These are two women chosen at inconvenient times of their lives to bring two rabble-rousing children, Jesus and John into the world. Enuma thinks the tale of their companionship might offer many of us perspective courage and encouragement this Advent. Enuma chose for her reflection 3 paintings of the story.

**The first by the early 16<sup>th</sup> cent Italian master Raphael.** Mary and Elizabeth are large figures in the foreground of a landscape. Elizabeth reaches to greet and welcomes the younger Mary, who approaches with head cast down, both resigned and contemplative, Mary with one hand cradling her belly. Elizabeth extends one arm around Mary and with the other grasps her hand firmly. She peers straight into Mary's smooth youthful face with a look of both resolute strength and empathy. She knows what it is like to carry something she should feel like a gift but perhaps also feels a burden. Her face suggests solidarity with this young woman. They will get through this time together.

Enuma was taken with this painting because it shows these two brave, humble and faithful women as committed witnesses to one another's journeys. Stepping bravely into roles that neither expected, yet that both understand the weight of, they are allowing themselves to be vessels for circumstances that will eventually change the world. Elizabeth blesses Mary with words once spoken to Joel and Judith in the Old Testament (Judges 5:24 & Judith 13:18). These women were blessed for their heroic faith and courage in warding off enemy armies hostile to Israel. Mary will follow in their footsteps, as she bears the Saviour who will crush the head of sin and death.

**In French artist Philippe de Champaigne's mid-17<sup>th</sup> Cent painting,** Mary and Elizabeth appear more like defiant, empowered co-conspirators, aware of their value in God's economy. They are huddled together, centre stage in the canvas, whispering between themselves.

Mary clutches Elizabeth's hand and with the other points in the opposite direction, as if suggesting their departure. The men around them pass by unaware, unthreatened by and uninterested in their presence. Enuma says what makes this painting so powerful is that it feels subversive, as if Mary and Elizabeth are colluding with the ultimate power source. The world is on the brink of a power shift that will shake everything up in society, and these two women are literally carrying the power shifts within them.

Enuma then goes on to speak of the present age of social media where people are encouraged to share everything that happens to us almost minute by minute, so that it feels as if no news is sacred or worth holding close.

**The Third painting by Vermont-based artist Janet McKenzie** shows the two women standing together, holding one another, but still in their separate internal worlds.

In this picture Mary and Elizabeth are majestically tall and slender, wrapped in swaths of scarves. There is a quiet dignity to both women as they stand with their eyes closed, almost meditating on their realities. Elizabeth has her hand resting on Mary's belly, and Mary's visible hand is held against her own cheek. Behind are two lines on the wall that shape a cross. There are crosses painted on Mary's shawl, symbolic of the unimaginable pain and sacrifice to come. For now, in a sense these women are saying yes to their own sacrifices, choosing the unknown but trusting that the disruption in their lives will be worth whatever is to come.

Enuma writes "I am moved by this painting because it illuminates the powerful act of simply standing as a witness to the trials and triumphs of another person's life, even amid one's own. It seems there must be a strengthening in that for both of them. Enuma goes on; "I think the companionship of Mary and

Elizabeth feels especially powerful right now because we are all going through our own adjustment to new realities of Covid. I hope there is a way each of us can figure out how to be an Elizabeth to a Mary in our lives, and vice versa. That we can step forward with someone else into that uncertain space of a transforming life, mixed with blessing and challenge, to stand alongside another person's journey, trusting that in that act we too are somehow fortified and encouraged on our own walk."

Canon Philip Dyson

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