

Along the track

Song of Joy

Ein Karem is a beautiful little town. It has an atmosphere that makes one conscious very quickly that something special happened here. It has a population of around 2,000 but attracts three million visitors a year, mostly pilgrims from around the world.

The church there celebrates a very joy-filled event, Mary's visit to her cousin Elizabeth. *At that time Mary got ready and hurried to a town in the hill country of Judea (Lk 1:39).* It wasn't an easy trip over those mountains and hills for a young, pregnant woman, but Mary 'hurried' to get there.

The early paintings of this event, up until the 12th century, showed the two women greeting each other with formality and reserve, then at the beginning of the 15th century, Elizabeth was shown in paintings kneeling reverentially before her cousin. Today, there is a very modern statue outside the Church of the Visitation at Ein Karem that depicts Elizabeth greeting her cousin Mary and both look very pregnant. Both of them are obviously thrilled to see each other. Inside the church there is a painting with the two of them joyfully embracing each other – they are both smiling. This is not the sentimental Mary we sometimes see in paintings; this is rather a strong and passionate young woman.

These modern, joyful images were 'contagious'. The mood of the people looking at them changed, and they began to smile, to talk to each other, even strangers and laughter was not uncommon. There doesn't seem to be much joy like that around today, especially in our churches. Surely, like Mary and Elizabeth, those who have faith should be people who bring joy to the world. But there doesn't seem to be much joy in religion, in having a faith these days. "Do you still go to Mass?" is often the incredulous question. Sometimes the reaction can be quite hostile, not just from those who might have been wounded by the Church but by those who need a scapegoat to justify their current stance. I don't mean that as a cynical putdown of all those who may have a different point of view but I have met quite a few who struggle in that way.

So what message has the Visitation for us in these times? Mary, the pregnant but unwed woman, travels to the hill country to be with her older cousin

Elizabeth, who is also pregnant. To be unmarried and pregnant in the Middle East of that time was dangerous space for a woman. She could be driven out of the family. She will certainly be forever disgraced. She could be stoned to death. But, rather than hide away, Mary chooses to hurry across those hills to rejoice with her cousin. Both of them have received momentous news and trying to fathom what it means must have been... well, are there words to describe that, to fathom the conversation they must have had? But, in the words of Sr Joan Chittister, seeking the support of another woman in the midst of struggle has made emotional sense to women for centuries.

This event celebrates women, not just these two, but all of them. The curse of Eve has been broken, the role of women, the place, the dignity of women has been restored. Well, theologically, theoretically at least - no longer carriers of the curse of Eve but, in stark contrast, now the bearers of salvation. But we have a long way to go, a very long way in recognising that in our beliefs, culture and structures. The Second Vatican Council declared in its Closing Message: *"The hour is coming, in fact has come, when the vocation of women is being acknowledged in its fullness, the hour in which women acquire in the world an influence, an effect and a power never hitherto achieved. That is why, at his moment when the human race is undergoing so deep a transformation, women imbued with a spirit of the Gospel can do so much to aid humanity in not falling"*. Well, that's a work in progress, I guess!

The visitation celebrates two courageous women whose faith made a profound difference to them and to us. Mary, the unmarried mother-to-be risked that dangerous journey to be with her cousin. Her culture told her to be afraid, to stay silent, to hide away. It is a long and arduous struggle to overcome centuries of imbued culture. It takes persistence in the face of entrenched opposition, vision in the face of those who have none, and above all, courage in the face of those who find comfort in the status quo.

Regards
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