

Second Sunday of Advent – 8th December 2024

The Second Joyful Mystery: The Visitation

Swift upon the gospel passage telling of the Annunciation, St Luke recounts the journey Mary made, as a newly expectant mother, to her cousin Elizabeth.

Like the Annunciation, the visit of Mary to her cousin Elizabeth has been frequently and famously portrayed in art. And like the Annunciation art, these pictures capture a moment that in one sense appears domestic and in another is of eternal significance.

We are told that Mary ‘went as quickly as she could’ to see Elizabeth. She travelled a distance of at least ninety miles which would have been an arduous journey over several days. Whilst the warmth of greeting between the two women, and their shared joy in the news of their pregnancies, is clear, of greater importance is the reaction of the unborn John the Baptist to the greeting which Mary gives to his mother, Elizabeth. Jesus was able, as the unborn son of God, to sanctify John the Baptist whilst the latter was also within his mother’s womb.

Elizabeth recognises this communication and declares the words that have become so well known to us as part of the Hail Mary ‘Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb.’

In response, we hear Mary’s great declaration of praise, now known universally as the Canticle of Mary or The Magnificat (Luke 1: 46 – 56). Mary’s proclamation is a prayer or song of praise for the great favour which God has shown to her as well as an acknowledgement that, in choosing her to be the mother of Jesus, God has fulfilled the promises previously made to Abraham and the Patriarchs. The Magnificat is strikingly similar to the prayer of praise which Hannah makes upon finding out she is expecting Samuel (2 Samuel 1-11). Both prayers speak to the consequences that will befall the rich and proud, whilst acknowledging the gifts that will be given to the poor in heart, pre-empting one of Jesus’ fundamental messages.

When my daughter joined an Anglican chapel choir a couple of years ago, she told of her joy at discovering the wide and rich repertoire that exists for what are affectionately known as ‘the Mag and the Nunc’ or more correctly the Magnificat and the Nunc Dimittis.

Canticles are hymn-like songs, with text from the New Testament but sung in the same style as the psalms, with their own antiphons and doxology. The Magnificat is believed to be perhaps the earliest Marian hymn. As far back as the time of St Benedict in the sixth century, it was one of a number of works sung as part of the marking of the monastic Offices of the day. At this time, the Magnificat would have been sung at the night service known as

Compline. More commonly nowadays, in the Roman Catholic liturgy the Magnificat is sung at the evening service of Vespers and in the Anglican liturgy both the canticles of the Magnificat and the Nunc Dimittis are sung at Evensong.

In its earliest form, and throughout the Medieval era, the Magnificat would have been sung to Gregorian chant or another plainsong chant using psalm tones. During the Renaissance, numerous settings of the Magnificat were composed, some by famous composers such as Josquin de Prez and Du Fay.

J.S. Bach famously set the Magnificat in a twelve-movement work, and into the twenty first century George Dyson's well known 1907 setting of the 'mag and the nunc' in D Major continues to inspire listeners (and singers) to reflect on Mary's great declaration of joy.

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