

Micah 5:2-5; Luke 1:39-45, 46-55

What sustains you? What sustains your hope in the face of cruel events such as the massacre of school children in Connecticut or predictions about the end of the world, or a road accident that takes the life of a friend or family member, or a storm that destroys a town? What enables you to maintain a passion for caring, or belief that you are important or that you can make a difference in this world?

In today's scripture what sustains Micah, Mary and Elizabeth is God's promise of a child born in Bethlehem. For many in our time that seems too far away and too long ago to be a valid source of hope anymore. But Mary believes the promise of God. Augustine, one of the early church leaders said that Mary conceived Christ in her heart before conceiving him in her womb. That's another way of saying she expected him. She waited for him. That expectation and waiting is carried forward to the waiting and expectation of Advent now.

However it is what lies behind the promise of the child that was important for them. They are sustained by the belief that the life of God is being intricately interwoven with human life, and with their own life. We could think of this as being like a piece of elaborate needlework, being crafted patiently and thoughtfully. Both the creator and what is created seem to reflect the same patterns of beauty. This sense of God becoming part of human life is the mystery we call the Incarnation of Christ.

The joy of Mary and Elizabeth is that their children are the work of God. Their joy is that God has entered Mary's life, becoming sacredly intimate, accepting her in spite of all her frailties. Isn't that also the joy of our faith. We are accepted and loved without deserving that.

Mary sees herself being intricately drawn into a new liaison or co-operation with God through the birth of Jesus. Her lowliness and God's greatness are being enmeshed. Isn't that also part of our Christmas faith and experience as God's people? How, why, can God be bothered with us?

Luke includes the "Magnificat" or Song of Joy which is based on a song by Hannah when she had an unexpected child. The song is divided into two parts – v's 46-50 in which Mary praises God's mercy and v's 51-55 where she praises God for overturning the injustices in the world. With the oppressed poor, who so often think of themselves as **born poor**, she cries, "God has filled the hungry with good things and sent the rich packing". It's an affirmation that the poor are important to God even if their society treats them badly.

In today's Melbourne Age there's an article by Barny Swartz outlining an experiment where cameras were given to children in poorer countries to record their daily activities. When the cameras came back, what the surprise was how happy these children were. A comparison was made between them and children from wealthier countries who seem unable to laugh like children from poorer countries.

I don't think this means we give up all concern for the poor but it does mean that poverty is not all there is. Hope & joy depend on more than wealth. Luke sees that the destiny of the poor is shaped by God and not only by the circumstances in which they live. This joy is a celebration of the goodness of God overturning all that destroys peoples hope and trust.

This song of joy is a defiant act of freedom in the tradition of slave and political protest songs. In the early 1990's the gov't in Praetoria, (St Africa) banned the lighting of candles, or the singing of Christmas carols in the slums of Soweto. When asked why - a spokesman said, "You know how emotional black women are. Christmas carols have an emotional effect upon them". In other words, you let a poor Jewish woman like Mary sing, or a black mother in Soweto sing, you don't know where it might lead. They might start believing they have a future and then where would we be?

It was reported that on Christmas Eve 1917 German and Australian soldiers were locked into a bitter war in France and suddenly, at 10 minutes to midnight the Germans called a truce. Eventually soldiers from both sides sang carols together, in different languages and held worship services. Then they went back to killing each other. The carols that year seemed to show something that is more important than the war they were fighting, important enough to stop for - and to sing about.

God keeps calling the church to be an alternative community that works with God in bringing hope to others. Our task is to let our life be a challenge to all activities that demean the love of God. We sing carols praising Jesus even when the community thinks this are old hat. We give our gifts - to help the poor see that at least God has not destined them to be poor. We provide friendship and pastoral care to those going through troubled times so people can know that in spite of all the difficulties they face, they are loved and valued by God. We are a community that tries to emulate Jesus in welcoming sinners rather than ostracising them. Mary's song encourages us to recover the joy of being God's people, and to be part of the revolution that Jesus birth has brought to the world. We are a people for whom faith makes a difference and who refuse to be diverted from the purposes of God.