

for joy! Of course, the unborn John didn't suddenly start dancing – although, six months into her pregnancy, his mother regularly felt him moving within her. Rather, the mother of the herald of the great king was so profoundly moved at meeting the one who was truly his tabernacle that she could think of no deeper expression of her joy.



In saying yes to God, their lives changed beyond all recognition for Mary, Elizabeth and Francis. If their present suddenly became uncertain, their futures were entirely unpredictable. All experienced criticism from those who couldn't or wouldn't understand and see beyond externals. Elizabeth was a very unusual "elderly primigravida". Mary

was no ordinary unmarried mother, as she explained to her confused parents and future husband that her pregnancy followed an angel's visit. Zechariah, Joseph, Joachim and Anne were all caught up in the gossip – as were Pietro and Pica Bernadone when their son's behaviour became increasingly "odd". Our actions and reactions affect others in ways we cannot anticipate.

RECOGNISING THE MIRACLE

Prophets are difficult companions. John the Baptist and Francis of Assisi inspired followers and detractors. John and Jesus would die in their struggle to show the world a different sort of loving. Francis, who became "another Christ", died to himself in his following of Jesus. But today's Gospel story is a meeting of two mothers-to-be. The mother of the herald looked at the tabernacle and recognised the miracle within. Today we share that joy.

Mass text

ENTRANCE ANTIPHON

Drop down dew from above, you heavens, and let the clouds rain down the Just One; let the earth be opened and bring forth a Saviour.

FIRST READING Micah 5:1-4

PSALM Psalm 79

RESPONSE God of hosts, bring us back; let your face shine on us and we shall be saved.

- O shepherd of Israel, hear us, shine forth from your cherubim throne. O Lord, rouse up your might, O Lord, come to our help. R.
- God of hosts, turn again, we implore, look down from heaven and see. Visit this vine and protect it, the vine your right hand has planted. R.
- May your hand be on the man you have chosen,

the man you have given your strength. And we shall never forsake you again: give us life that we may call upon your name. R.

SECOND READING Hebrews 10:5-10

GOSPEL ACCLAMATION

Alleluia, alleluia! I am the handmaid of the Lord: let what you have said be done to me. Alleluia!

GOSPEL Luke 1:39-45

COMMUNION ANTIPHON

Behold, a Virgin shall conceive and bear a son; and his name will be called Emmanuel.

Next Sunday's Readings:

- 1 Samuel 1:20-22, 24-28
- 1 John 3:1-2, 21-24
- Luke 2:41-52



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THE HERALD AND THE TABERNACLE

Francesco Bernadone was walking through the snow from Gubbio towards the Abbey of Vallingegno when the robbers found him. When he was happy, he sang out loud, so perhaps they heard him before demanding to know his identity. They quickly decided that he was mad.

News travels fast. They had possibly heard of the rich young man who had publicly stripped himself of everything and announced, in front of the bishop, "Hitherto I have called Pietro Bernardone my father; but because I am resolved to serve God, I return to him the money on account of which he was so perturbed, and also the clothes I wore which are his; and from now on I will say, 'Our Father who art in heaven', and not 'my father Pietro Bernardone'."

The bishop, anticipating emotional meetings with Francesco's furious but heartbroken parents, was possibly glad to provide some second-hand clothing and see him leave to follow his vocation in life. Now, as Francis, carrying nothing worth stealing, was confronted by robbers, he declared, "I am a herald of the great king." They laughed and threw him into the snow, from where he stood up, dusted himself down and, singing, continued his journey towards the abbey.

The monks at Vallingegno accepted Francesco as a scullery boy. However, as Cardinal Basil Hume once remarked, "St Francis of Assisi would have driven any Benedictine community crazy! No wonder it didn't take long for Francis and the monks to recognise that God was not asking him to become a Benedictine!" Francesco was indeed "a herald of the great king" – but Mary was the tabernacle.

According to maps, the distance between Mary's home in Nazareth and her cousin Elizabeth's in Ein Karem is about ninety-five miles and would take approximately thirty-two hours of continuous walking. As a young woman, Mary surely wouldn't have travelled alone through the wilderness, known for its bandits? Perhaps she travelled with someone else from Nazareth. Perhaps she joined a caravan heading towards Jerusalem. Mary's cousin was not expecting a visitor who would stay for several months but that was not a problem in an area famous for its hospitality towards relatives and travellers.

Elizabeth was six months pregnant when the angel visited Nazareth. Her pregnancy at an advanced age probably generated mixed reactions, not all of them supportive. No wonder she was so pleased at her young cousin's unexpected arrival and delightedly declared that even the child in her womb danced

Hope in the darkness



We continue this series of reflections for Advent with Sister Janet Fearnis FMDM.



19 DECEMBER 2021

4TH SUNDAY OF ADVENT

YEAR C

DIVINE OFFICE WEEK IV