

APPRECIATING RELATIONSHIPS

Luke 1:39–56

In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country, where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth.

These two women—the older Elizabeth, the younger Mary—coming together at this special time in their lives. They both obviously valued the relationship, and appreciated each other very much—‘Mary set out and went with haste’ on the considerable journey to get to where Elizabeth lived in the hill country, and Elizabeth was so pleased to see her, and greeted Mary with extraordinary respect.

Relationships are very much to the fore at this time of year. Many of us will be getting together with family and friends over Christmas—we may have started doing that already. The week before last Vivien and I had twenty people, Scripture Union Council and staff that Vivien is involved with, at our home for a Christmas lunch. When we get back home after Christmas we’ll be getting together with sixteen of our family. We have recently sent out our Christmas cards and letters and emails to about one hundred and forty people or couples we have formed relationships with over the years—lovely to pause and savour and value those dear people and what they mean to us. And to pray for them as we do that. And then the delight of hearing back from them.

Are we in a position now in our lives where we can value those relationships we have with other people for the wonderful reality that they are, and appreciate each other with extraordinary respect?

How many relationships are here in this church this morning? If we drew criss-crossing lines between each one of us and every other person here, how many lines would there be? I think mathematically you can work it out by adding up each of the numbers up to the number of people in the group, then take away the number of the whole. So between Vivien and me—that's two people—so one plus two is three, take away two, is one relationship. In a group of five people: that's $1+2+3+4+5$, that comes to 15, take away 5, is 10 lines, ten relationships—you can draw it out on a piece of paper to see if that's right. In a group of ten there are forty-five relationships; in a group of thirty people here there are four hundred and thirty-five connections or relationships. That's a lot of relationships to appreciate, isn't it, just in this church. Then each of us have lines going out to members of our families, and friends out in the community. What a marvellous network of relationships—in the end covering the whole globe!

How many people can we actually relate to, in a meaningful way? Have you ever heard of the Dunbar number? I found it in Wikipedia: Robin Dunbar, a British anthropologist, researched the brain size of primates and their average social group size, and he worked out in the 1990s that with the size of the human brain each of us is capable of maintaining stable social relationships with about one hundred and fifty other persons. That is, when we know

who each person is, and how they relate to every other person. That is an amazing capacity for relationships!

And then when you think that God relates to every single person ever made, that tells you how much bigger God's brain is than ours!

So how are we going, this Advent season, appreciating one another, and valuing the relationships we have?

Let's look at that relationship between Mary and Elizabeth—see that line drawn between them—and then see how that relationship is impacted by some others—the other lines that interconnect with them. Let's read it again:

In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country, where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth.

They were related to each other—they might have been cousins. They also had something else in common: they were both pregnant with their first baby—Elizabeth, after many years of marriage unable to have children, now six months pregnant to her husband Zechariah with the baby that was going to be John the Baptist, and Mary, engaged to Joseph of Nazareth but not yet married, a young virgin, newly pregnant with the baby Jesus. Both by a special intervention of God, announced by an angel. No doubt that was what brought them together. Mary, given her circumstances and the things people would have been saying, maybe glad to get out of Nazareth for a while, to spend time with a dear older relative, in a similar situation, who would understand and support her. They spent three happy months together (Luke 1:56), in the hill country.

What was happening there was not just between Elizabeth and Mary. In those two pregnant women there were already two other persons present. What happened when the two women met? Let's read on:

When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leaped in her womb.

Those of you who have had a child in your womb, do you remember when you first felt that kick, that movement? We have had four children, and Vivien would say to me, 'Come and feel this', and I would put my hand on her and feel that boomp. Well this was more than just a kick, it was more like a lunge—'the child leaped in her womb'. Who was the child in Elizabeth's womb? The one who was to be John the Baptist. His father Zechariah had been told by the angel that this John would 'be filled with the Holy Spirit' 'even before his birth' (Luke 1:15). What was John's special mission? To turn people back to God in preparation for the coming of Jesus. And here was Mary, with Jesus in her womb, and John in Elizabeth's womb by the Holy Spirit has instant recognition of the one he is to announce, and leaps—as Elizabeth says, 'For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leaped for joy'. (Luke 1:44).

So there are a number of relationships there, aren't there? More lines that we could draw. Between Elizabeth and the baby within her womb—an inexpressibly intimate relationship, where you can feel every movement. Between the baby in her womb and the approach of Mary, and between the baby John in Elizabeth's womb filled with the

Holy Spirit and the baby Jesus in Mary's womb conceived by the Holy Spirit—strong connections.

So before either of them was born, John, at a very deep primal level, was responding to the coming of Jesus. What a moment!

How is our relationship with the Lord Jesus? Does it happen with us at that gut level? Are there times when we sense his approach? Have we ever been caught out by that thrill of recognition?

This relationship between John and Jesus profoundly impacted the relationship between Elizabeth and Mary. It is what really brings them together, and engenders that extraordinary respect:

When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit and exclaimed with a loud cry, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb".

I once heard a story called 'The Rabbi's Gift'. You may know it. It's about a Christian monastery that has fallen on hard times—there is only one abbot and four monks left in it, and they are all nearing the end of their lives, and no new novices are joining them. The abbot consults the local Jewish Rabbi, who is not able to help them. Except that he says in parting: 'I will just say this: the Messiah is among you'. The abbot relays this back to the other monks, and they grow in wonderment and anticipation—could it be that one of us is the Messiah? Which one of us might it be? Might it even be me? As a result, they begin to treat each other, and themselves, with extraordinary respect, just in

case one of them might be the Messiah. And of course, in the story, that makes all the difference to the life and growth of the monastery.

There is more than a grain of truth in that story. Here with Elizabeth and Mary we have it happening in reality. The Messiah is literally among them, in the womb of Mary. And that makes all the difference to their relationships with each other—he is the one who has brought them together.

And Jesus the Messiah is truly present here with us this morning, because he has said, 'I am with you always' (Matt. 28:20). He is the one who has brought us together—each of us are here on account of our connection with him.

In reflecting on that story of the Rabbi's gift, I wondered: in what ways can I treat others with extraordinary respect, particularly any who may find me disagreeable? Not just those I may disagree with, but those who may find me disagreeable—I find it very hard to relate well with them. I have found the best thing to do is to look for the Messiah in them—where is Jesus in their heart, what is Jesus doing with this person in their lives, how has he gifted them? And then—even harder perhaps—to be open to receive that gift from them.

That touches on the difficulties we experience when our relationships are not so good, because none of us are perfect—all of us are sinners. When the lines of connection between us get broken. Sadly, that can happen or be highlighted at Christmas too. Or even: when we become painfully aware that our relationship with God does not measure up to much—when we are often faithless and

unreliable in that. This is the very situation Jesus was coming to redress. And Mary knew it—did you notice what she sang?

my spirit rejoices in God my **Savior**.

Far from being perfect or immaculate, Mary knew she needed a Saviour, that she was just as much a sinner as the rest of us. In Matthew's gospel, when the angel told Joseph about Mary's son, he was told, 'you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins' (Matthew 1:21). Mary knew she needed that as much as any of us, and that she carried in her own womb—amazingly—the one who would bring that to pass. No wonder she sang, 'My soul magnifies the Lord'!

And she sang of God's mercy. In this sinful world where relationships break down, it's that mercy of God in Christ that makes restored relationships possible—saving us from our sins and bringing us back into connection with God and with each other.

Did you notice that all of this happened when Elizabeth 'was filled with the Holy Spirit'? And the baby John was filled with the Holy Spirit in his mother's womb, and Jesus' was conceived in Mary by the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is the one who makes those connections between us. He is the one who brings this mercy of God in Christ to bear in our lives. He's here now ready to do that, and to mend our devastated relationships. How is our relationship with the Holy Spirit? Let us not resist Him—resistance is pointless, and counterproductive. Let us not grieve him by our

refusal. He is the one who makes relationships not only possible, but lasting and fruitful.

Mary and Elizabeth spent three significant months together—no doubt with all the cut and thrust that comes with living together in close quarters—but what happened there—those precious relationships—by the mercy of God, lasts forever.