

In 1061, in the reign of Edward the Confessor, the widow of the Lord of the Manor of Walsingham Parva, called Richeldis, had a vision of the Virgin Mary. Mary took Richeldis in spirit to Nazareth to the place, the house, where the Angel Gabriel had appeared to her.

'Look, daughter' said Our Lady. 'Take the measurements of this house and erect another one like it in Walsingham, dedicated to praising and honouring me. All who come there shall find help in their need.'

Since then, Walsingham has been venerated as one of the holiest places in England. By late Middle Ages, it was said to be the duty of every Englishman to visit Our Lady at Walsingham.

By the 14th century, when Chaucer wrote his Canterbury Tales (stories told by pilgrims travelling to Canterbury), Walsingham and Canterbury were the two premier places of pilgrimage in England. Walsingham, a shrine to Our Lady, was the more important of the two.

Pilgrims travelled all over England along well-established pilgrim routes. The journey from London to Walsingham was via Waltham Abbey, Newmarket, Swaffham and East Barsham.

Turning now to our Gospel reading, *Luke 1.39*

'In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country, ⁴⁰where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth.

⁵⁶And Mary remained with her about three months and then returned to her home.'

Let's imagine that years later, at the end of her long life, people gathered around Mary, as she sat in the shade of a tamarisk tree, and they asked her to tell again the story of her travelling days, her pilgrim days. How she told them again about the journeys she had made and how they changed her:

- About the arduous journey she and Joseph made when she was heavily pregnant, walking from Nazareth to Bethlehem, under orders from the Occupation.

- About the dangerous journey they made after hearing that wicked King Herod was seeking her son's life and they had to escape by night and flee to Egypt.
- About the anxious journey she made back to the Temple at Jerusalem to search for her 12-year-old son, missing for 3 days.
- About the anguished journey she and several sisters made to stand with him at the cross.
- About the hopeful journey she and the disciples made to an upper room, waiting for the Holy Spirit.

But one journey stands out amongst them all.

One journey that Mary made alone.

'In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country ...'

In Luke's Gospel, Mary is alone. Joseph is not yet with her.

After the visit of the angel Gabriel, announcing the birth of the Messiah, Mary hurriedly sets out on the first of her recorded journeys in Scripture.

She sets out towards Jerusalem, a route she knows well.

She sets out in haste. With great urgency.

She has good reason.

Finding herself unexpectedly pregnant out of wedlock, Mary's life is at risk. The statutory sentence for adultery was stoning.

Who would believe her pregnancy was of the Holy Spirit?

To whom she could turn for wise counsel and help?

Who could she trust?

Her parents?

Her Rabbi?

Her fiancé Joseph?

Mary's thoughts turn to Elizabeth.

Wise Elizabeth, Mary's aged but childless relative, who had always treated Mary like the daughter she never had.

Who was always such good company.

And what's more, hadn't the Angel Gabriel told Mary that Elizabeth had unexpectedly conceived a son, and was now six months pregnant??

So, Mary flees to Elizabeth, who lives with her husband Zechariah, a Priest, in hill country near Jerusalem.

Mary goes to Elizabeth, the one person who would surely believe her and protect her.

She runs for her life.

Yet still, Mary is taking a great risk.

Elizabeth's husband, Zechariah, is a Priest and a noted man of the Law. If he sees Mary is pregnant, that could mean trouble. But she is not yet showing. She can go to Elizabeth and stay a week or so, and then decide what to do next.

The journey from Nazareth to the Judean hill country was long and arduous.

Avoiding hostile territory in Samaria, it is around 80 miles.

Day and night, Mary travelled alone, taking little rest for herself.

Alone and afraid, she kept going.

Years later, sitting under the tamarisk tree, Mary tells the story again, of all that happened when she arrived at the home of Elizabeth and Zechariah. With faith and imagination, let us hear what Mary might have said,

"Elizabeth met me at the door, the entrance to the house. It seems she heard me coming up the hill, singing as I neared the end of my journey. We fell on each other's shoulders, all the tension and pain flowing from my body. I felt relief in her arms. She welcomed me.

Our bellies touching. I could feel her unborn child moving against mine, kicking, dancing, leaping for joy. Later, she told me that was the sign.

Then she cried out, a loud shout of pure joy, I will never forget all my days. It was like the voice of an angel,

“Blessed are you among women and blessed is the fruit of your womb. ⁴³And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me? ⁴⁴For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leaped for joy. ⁴⁵And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfilment of what was spoken to her by the Lord.”

In that moment, all my shame lifted from me. All my fear, all embarrassment. I knew that whatever lay ahead, I was accepted. I knew I was loved, I was not alone. I was blessed.

If just one person can accept me without asking questions, if one person can trust that GOD is at work in my life, then there is hope.

Others will come to believe, too, in time.

It was a miracle. A new beginning. We were united in one fellowship, knowing GOD had looked with favour on the world, knowing the LORD had visited the earth.

I will never forget that day, as long as I live.

She blessed me. She blessed my unborn child. She believed me.

I was met with joy and belief.

In the place of judgment and shame, I received blessing and grace.

In the end, I stayed for three months, until after their son John was born. She showed me what to do. It was a hallowed, precious time. Unforgettable.

But then I had to go back. I couldn't stay there forever.

It was not where my life would be. I had to go back.

Back to my parents, my fiancé, my community, my home.

Only now, thanks to wise Elizabeth, I could face the future with a sure and confident trust and the knowing that all would be well.”

Led by the Spirit, Elizabeth received and accepted Mary.

All of us are called to be Elizabeths, affirming the faith of others.

Welcoming and accepting others as we find them, without judgment or criticism.

Receiving others, as we would Christ himself.

Some commentators see the Visitation as the birth of the first Christ-centred community of faith. The first cell church or house group. A place of sheltering relationship, of protection, love and growth.

For 90 days and more, Elizabeth and Mary encouraged each other. They discipled each other. Elizabeth mentored Mary, Mary comforted Elizabeth.

Did they sew garments together for their unborn children??

Did Elizabeth give Mary her first set of swaddling bands??

They surely laughed and cried together, sang together, praised GOD together.

Recalling the prophets and the Psalms.

Sharing stories of Sarah, Naomi and Ruth, Rebecca, Rachel and Hannah.

And it may be that they wrote together this new Psalm, that we now call 'The Magnificat.' Elizabeth, wife of a learned Priest Zechariah, helping Mary shape her faith, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. Their 'yes' to God and their 'no' to all that denies life. Setting out GOD's 'upside-down' priorities. A prelude to the entire gospel.

All of us have made journeys to be here today.

Our journeys have changed us too.

Maybe we haven't fled for our life, but we have come here with our needs.

Our need for love, healing, acceptance, hope.

Our need for discernment of GOD's way, for direction, guidance. For a word.

We have come with our burden of care.

We have come to Mary, author of the Magnificat, with our deep concern for justice in the world.

We have come to the One who came to seek and save that which is lost.

We have come to draw close to GOD and let the love of GOD draw us close.

We have made our pilgrimage here, to this Walsingham. To this Nazareth.

Long before the dawn of time, God longed to live among God's people, as one of us.

Not, as King David imagined, in a house or a temple or a palace.

Much closer than that.

As close as Mary's unborn child. Flesh of our flesh and bone of our bone.

Since before time, God has longed to experience humanity first hand, to be one with us, to be one of us.

Today, it is fulfilled in our midst,

"The Word became flesh and lived among us."

Prayer