

Blessed Virgin Mary, '21
Eindhoven, Zwolle

Galatians 4:4-7; Luke 1:39-55

Magnificent humility, integrity and fidelity

'Jesus saves!' That is a striking straightforward motto we believe in, and affirm. You often see it on church billboards and on T-shirts and car bumper-stickers around the world (albeit in various languages of course).

And I believe Christ accepts this way of describing his mission. Yet, as we see in John's Gospel in particular, and in the Synoptics, Jesus does not point us to Himself all the time, but humbly insists all that He does is in the service of His loving Father and powered by Holy Spirit. Jesus saves, with and through the Father and the Spirit.

Jesus demonstrates that salvation is not a one-man show, but comes from the compassion and sacrifice of our God, the Trinity, to which the name and life of this church, and the Spirit's work in the whole church, from the beginning, attest.

Moreover, as we read Scripture, we see too that salvation must involve us, too, by definition. God the Three-in-One makes it all possible. But we of course are to be part of it, too.

If you're drowning and you refuse help, you won't make it. God wants to save us, and often to be saved, we need to cooperate. Indeed, to build us up, so that we grow strong in faith, God also wants us to teach each other to swim, and be lifeguards for each other. Jesus called his

followers to be fishers of men. Training to be a lifeguard in that sense is another way of putting that, IMHO.

The simple point I attempt to make is that God's salvation may not depend on us, but it certainly always involves us. We are all those whom God so desperately wants to save, and God desperately wants us to want to be saved. And he wants us to help Him help save others.

In our church tradition, baptism, which incidentally involves physical water as a sacramental sign, prompts us rise to this.

God's loving will and saving power are essential, irreplaceable. God wants us.

But we are to respond. If we are too young to say so, our parents or others speak for us at our baptisms, affirming their faith in God and in us, and God's and their love and commitment to nurture and support us as we grow in faith. To help be our lifeguards, following the example of the greatest lifeguard.

That all is not in our hands, or subject to what we say, is itself an act of faith. This is one reason why Martin Luther insisted on retaining infant baptism in the Reformation. We must learn to leave salvation ultimately to God. That itself is an act of faith. God's love saves us. And at what point in our lives do we first experience God's love and care? From day one. But God definitely wants us to affirm His love with our lips and in our lives. To help God help others, too.

Today in our Gospel reading, Mary, the Mother of our Lord, was kindly visiting her older cousin Elizabeth, whose own unborn baby was kicked up a fuss inside her when Mary came near. He would continue to do that when he emerged, to continue to wake the world up and prepare the way for the Lord.

Critics of modern cinema have noted that films rarely feature exclusive conversations between two or more women, with no guy hanging about. Well, this ancient story does, and I've no idea how Luke got hold of it, but thank the Lord he passed it on.

Elizabeth an older woman, married to a priest, had had to bear the personal pain and, in her day, social stigma, of not being able to have children. Yet, somehow, she was now expecting. Elizabeth and Zechariah's story recalls that of Sarah and Abraham, who were also asked to trust in what was considered impossible.

And we have Mary, an ordinary, small town girl who has this baffling story of how an angel told her she would become pregnant, outside her relationship with her fiancé.

You can just imagine the sorts of cynical and dismissive speculation going on all around her. Yeah right, Mary, you've just contrived a fantastic cover for infidelity. Can't imagine what she endured. Thank goodness this came before tabloids and social media.

But fair enough, a virgin birth would've seemed far-fetched in any age.

But though we must make wise and worthy use of the gift of science and diligent research, we also need recognize the limits of our own capacity to see and prove everything. Great scientific minds usually leave the door open to new discoveries. If we presume that what is true is only what we personally witness and approve, we can easily become like so many blind mice, caught in a maze, incapable of thinking outside of the box. Sometimes, it is right and rational to take some seemingly impossible things seriously.

Mary and Elizabeth model this for us: humility and courage and openness. And an exceptionally willingness to go with God. This is the cooperative faith which brings salvation.

Neither Elizabeth nor Mary knew if or when they would come to be parents. They put their faith and trust in God.

Neither Elizabeth nor Mary knew in advance exactly what would become of their boys. In fact, had they known all about their boys awesome faith but also the price they would pay for it, on an execution block and on a cross, would they have reacted differently?

I doubt it. Elizabeth and Mary bravely accepted to take part in and work with God's unexpected plan of salvation. They recognized it was bigger and greater than they could fathom, but they jumped in. We are humbled by them.

This whole story shows not just human humility, but also *Godly* humility. The Angel Gabriel's initial visit to Mary already shows this: God, through his messenger, actually simply *asks* a mortal's help, and *waits* for a response. Imagine, on Mary's answer hung the salvation of the entire world. In a way, Mary's story models perfect mutual respect between God and humanity, and also, incredibly humbling humility on both sides.

Mary will give birth to someone who will teach us that our Saviour is also a Servant. He learned that from his earthly mother and his heavenly father. Incredibly humbling, an example to us.

Mary's and Elizabeth's lives would not be easy, but they are a blessing and example to us.

When we talk about being blessed today, we often refer to things going *well* for us. But I wonder, can we learn from Elizabeth and Mary and see blessings in situations where most would not? Do we affirm each other, and look to see God's grace working even in difficult circumstances? Elizabeth and Mary are blessings to each other.

Mary sings out with praise to God. Luke 1:46-55 are what we now call the *Magnificat*, the Song of Mary, one of three great canticles found at the beginning of Luke's Gospel. Christians have been singing this song for at least 1000 years.

No wonder, because it captures so much of the core of the Gospel message to us: that God's loving, saving work defies our earthly expectations and ethics.

It proclaims God's will for humility, integrity and fidelity.

God is faithful; God keeps his promises to save his people. This song parallels the prayer of thanks Hannah offered for her unexpected son Samuel. The promise God made to Abraham and his children will come good. God is faithful.

Moreover, just as the prophets had had to proclaim, just as John the Baptist would preach, God's kingdom is not about selfishness and stealth, but about peace, justice, care for those in need, about the holy health of all.

5 Casting down the mighty from their thrones *
and lifting up the lowly.

6 He has filled the hungry with good things *
and sent the rich away empty.

The Magnificat witnesses to how the Lord intends to turn the wicked ways of the world upside down.

And will continue to do so, so that and until his Kingdom comes. In this humbling song of praise, Mary speaks prophetically about the society God wants.

Let God's promised Kingdom of mercy come! Let us work with God for it, like John the Baptist, Elizabeth and Mary, like our Lord Jesus Christ Himself. All children of God, living for God.

We're all invited to help with God's salvation, to be lifeguards, to work for His kingdom, and even to be part of the family.

Jesus Christ us to join Him, to be brothers and sisters with Him in and for God.

St Paul boldly confirms this in his letter to the Galatians:

3:²⁶ So in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith, ²⁷ for all of you who were baptised into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. ²⁸ There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. ²⁹ If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise.

⁴ When the set time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, ⁵ to redeem those under the law, that we might receive adoption to sonship. ⁶ Because you are his sons, God sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, the Spirit who calls out, 'Abba, Father.' ⁷ So you are no longer a slave, but God's child; and since you are his child, God has made you also an heir.

We have a unique and life-giving opportunity as Christians, to have an intimate relationship with our infinite and all-powerful Creator. To know God as our Daddy.

So unexpected by us, but so yearned for by God.

As theologian Jane Williams notes, 'God has deliberately made his plan out of this long chain with many links, each one of them fragile, each one of them necessary. Who knows how many times links were broken as people rejected their place in the plan? Yet God is not thwarted; he simply waits and works, until the chain can be mended.'

That the Son of God, born of a humble and gracious human mother, came to save us and wants us to help him bring his kingdom of Love, Humility, Integrity and Fidelity, is incredible, inspiring and involving. Let's be a part of it.

And today and always, with Mary, let us ponder and give thanks for what is *possible* through God. And humbly and joyfully accept our place, however small, in God's great chain of salvation. And play our part. Giving Glory to God and love to his Creation, helping him lift it back up to life. Amen.