



Can we find the wonder of Christmas?

When can you last remember being overwhelmed by a sudden experience of wonder? Perhaps it was a brilliant sunset, or witnessing the birth of a baby, or being inspired by a powerful speech.

Sometimes, it takes something big to awaken our spirits and cause us to wonder. We're not talking here about wonder as questioning. For example, during Covid how many of us said more than once, 'I wonder how long lockdown will last?'

Today, we are talking about 'wonder' as an experience of awe. To 'wonder' in this sense is to be awestruck. Perhaps there is no greater example of wonder than in today's gospel reading. Here we have two women who have been blown away, to use a colloquial expression for wonder, by how God has placed them in the centre of the divine plan for humanity.

It's not only that they are at the centre of God's plan, but in a very natural way. Both women will bear children, one of whom will transform humankind and the other who will assist. They are full of wonder at how God has chosen them. Let's take a look at their experience and see how it can speak into our lives.

1. The wonder: Nothing is impossible with God.

Our reading tells what happened after an angel of the Lord had come to Mary, foretelling that she would be the mother of Jesus and Elizabeth, her relative, would give birth in her old age to the person we now know as John the Baptist. Just in case Mary questioned the probability of this news, the angel added: 'For nothing is impossible with God' (Luke 1:37).

From verse 39, we then discover that not only was the impossible possible, but there was great expectancy and excitement between Mary and Elizabeth about it already happening. It is the perfect example of what we talked about last week; the prophetic word of God and its fulfilment happening together. God announces what will take place and, before we know it, what God has said becomes our reality.

It is vital in these days of pandemic, political unrest, environmental challenges and the masking of truth, that we take this seriously – for our own lives, faith communities and world. 'Nothing is impossible with God!' Taking it seriously is about believing it to be true. God is in the business of transformation and is looking for individuals and groups of people through whom miracles of transformation can happen; whose hearts are open to the power of God and the wonder of God being displayed in their lives; who will become God's hands, God's face and God's voice to the world.

2. The wonder of God gives birth to excitement and faith

We see the wonder of God and allow ourselves to be shaken out of our routine, hum-drum or self-centred existence and get excited about what God is showing us. The wonder gives birth to excitement and we begin living into its possibility.

In Mary's case, she was so excited by what God had shown her that the first thing she did was hurry off to Elizabeth's home in the hill country of Judah, to share her excitement. Can you imagine the scene when Mary and Elizabeth met and shared their news? And as if the sharing of this 'wonder-filled' news wasn't enough, we read that Elizabeth's baby leapt in her womb and she was filled with the Holy Spirit.

She said to Mary, 'As soon as the sound of your greeting reached my ears, the baby in my womb leapt for joy.' Then she added, 'Blessed is she who has believed that what the Lord has said to her will be accomplished' (Luke 1:44-45). These women encounter the wonder of God, are filled with excitement and belief as a result; and they sense the blessing of God on their lives.

Amid today's myriad distractions and predictions of calamity, perhaps we too need a fresh encounter with the wonder of God; opening our lives to a God-way of looking at humanity's plight. It is looking through the lens of Jesus being Emmanuel, God with us. Jesus makes all the difference. It is the way of 'nothing is impossible'. When we believe God with all our hearts, our belief opens a door for the impossible to become possible and we start seeing the miracles of God materialising in our day-to-day lives. The hum-drum becomes the upbeat, the wall in front of us becomes scalable, we see God's hand at every turn instead of despair and impossibility.

Like the wonder of God experienced by Mary and Elizabeth became the conduit for the coming of Jesus into the world, our experience of the wonder of God can be a conduit for us – if we can just believe it, see it, grasp its reality. It is the conduit for Jesus coming again into our lives by his Holy Spirit, enlivening, preparing and sending us out to be his agents of transformation. It can be a new day for both the Church and the world.

3. The wonder of God gives birth to humility

There is no doubt that there is a significant emphasis in our reading on the wonder of God and His actions producing humility in our lives. It is different from the wonder produced in football fans, for example, when a seemingly impossible goal is scored. God's wonders have the effect of making us humble before God, not proud.

This is the counter-cultural way of the Kingdom of God. Jesus challenges the egocentricity of humankind that ultimately is behind us losing our way, our peace and spiraling downwards. The kingdoms of Israel and Judah are classic cases. They lost their way when they lost their God-focus. They became shadows of their former selves, running into great trouble, within and without, living and existing in defeat – first Israel by the Assyrians and then Judah by the Babylonians.

In contrast, everything about Jesus' entry into the world was humble – born in a cattle shed because there was no room in the city's hotels; fleeing the region with his parents as refugees because of the threat of persecution from the Roman King Herod.

And here, in our reading from Luke chapter one today, we can see the humility of his mother, Mary, and her relative, Elizabeth. As well as excited and filled with faith, they are humbled by the wonder of what God has shown them. Amid their excitement, Mary says, 'My soul glorifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour, for he has been mindful of the humble state of his servant' (Luke 1:46-48).

As an adult in ministry in Palestine, Jesus made it clear to his earliest followers: 'The Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve' (Matthew 20:28). When they were arguing about who was more important among them, he said, 'The greatest among you will be your servant' (Matthew 23:11). In other words, the Christ way – the Kingdom of God way – is the way of humility and servanthood. Nothing else can bring on the revitalisation of our lives, the Church and

the world except a recalibration in the spirit of servanthood. 'So let us learn how to serve,' says the song we're about to sing!

Response It's only six days to Christmas Day. Is it possible for us to realise afresh in 2021, the wonder of Jesus coming into our world as a baby, fully identifying with us and our humanity? Can we bow down and worship him from the very depths of our being despite all the distractions and fears around us? Can we enter an awakening of our hearts to his majesty and, like Mary, say 'yes' to God?