

# The Visitation of Mary to Elizabeth

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## Introduction

Today is the Feast of the Visitation when we celebrate the story of Mary's visit to Elizabeth and the words which they exchange – words which include one of the most famous Christian canticles. There is much in the substance of the the text of Mary's great hymn of praise and its addressing of power imbalances that can give us starting places for thinking about aspects of conflict (see [here](#) for a reflection on this). There are also things in the story of the meeting itself, especially around the role of hospitality and community in the genesis and growth of understanding, which can shed helpful light as we think about conflict situations.

**Preparation:** Find some different depictions of this encounter, choose one which draws you and then spend some time using the image to help you enter the story.

Art historian Dr Deborah Lewer, Senior Lecturer in History of Art at the University of Glasgow, in partnership with St Mary's Episcopal Cathedral in Glasgow, has made a short art video podcast reflecting on Jacopo Carucci Pontormo's famous painting of the Visitation which you can view [here](#).

(There is also a short liturgy, suitable for use at home, to accompany this podcast which you can download from [here](#)).

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## Text

**Luke 1:39–57**

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.

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.

And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me?

For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leaped for joy.

And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfilment of what was spoken to her by the Lord."

And Mary said, "My soul magnifies the Lord,

and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,

for he has looked with favour on the lowliness of his servant. Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed;

for the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name.

His mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation.

He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.

He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly;

he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty.

He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy,

according to the promise he made to our ancestors, to Abraham and to his descendants forever."

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

Now the time came for Elizabeth to give birth, and she bore a son.

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We tend to limit our notion of ‘the Visitation’ to just this event but, as Brendan Byrne notes, ‘Luke sees the whole life and ministry of Jesus as a “*visitation*” on God’s part to Israel and the world’[1], and his gospel explores the associated critical question of how the visitor will be received. It is unsurprising then that one of the great threads which runs through Luke’s Gospel is that of hospitality and the role that it plays in the growth of understanding and faith. One of the ways Luke uses to explore this theme across Luke–Acts is through stories of interaction – often between Jesus himself and another or others e.g Zacchaeus (9: 1–10); the ‘sinful’ woman and Simon (Lk 7: 36 –50).

A variation on this (and a favourite Lucan device in Acts[2]) happens in today’s Gospel passage: two individuals who have each had a religious experience which they only partly understand meet and, through the subsequent exchange, their individual experience becomes a communal experience and in the process its full meaning becomes apparent (for other examples see Philip and the Ethiopian in Acts 8; Saul and Ananias in Acts 9; Cornelius and Peter in Acts 10 and 11). In this instance we have two women – one with a dumbstruck husband and a totally unexpected pregnancy which has overturned a lifetime of shame; the other not yet married but with a pregnancy foretold (though not yet apparent) which is likely to bring shame, and consequently with burning questions as to its mechanics and meaning.

Luke’s narrative conveys something of this urgency for a better understanding of the angel’s enigmatic message. Mary sets out immediately (v39) and travels with haste to discover if the news about Elizabeth is true. This is no quick trip to a nearby town or village however – it involves a perilous 70 mile journey, undertaken at a time when, as a betrothed woman, she would be expected to be living in quiet modesty in her home. There is a lot of activity but very little information (What did she tell her parents? How did she travel? Did anyone go with her?) concentrated into this single sentence. But this brevity and compression simply emphasises the expansion which happens after Mary arrives – 16 verses are devoted to the initial exchange between the two women. In the course of these not only is extraordinary hospitality recognised and offered, but a cascade is set in motion which leads Elizabeth, Mary (and Luke’s readers), by stages, to a greater understanding not just of their own piece of the puzzle but of how these fit into the larger story of God’s purposes.

This cascade begins with the response of the unborn John who, Luke has already told us (1:15), was to be filled with the Holy Spirit ‘even before his birth’. We don’t know how much of Gabriel’s message Zechariah has been able to communicate to to his wife (or even if he himself understood it) but as Mary greets her, Elizabeth understands that something significant is happening. John’s spirit-inspired leap of recognition spirals out to involve her and she recognises what isn’t yet externally apparent and which her kinswoman has had no chance to tell her: not simply that Mary is pregnant, but that her unborn child is somehow deeply implicated in God’s plans for his people. Elizabeth’s response has two distinct elements: firstly this recognition that Mary is giving hospitality to God and that her name and that of her son will be celebrated by generations to come (*euloge* – to be praised and celebrated – is used in both instances in v42); secondly that what makes Mary *blessed* (v.45 the same word *makarios* – supremely blessed – is also used by Jesus in the beatitudes) is not her pregnancy *per se* but her faith, her belief that ‘that there would be a fulfilment of what was spoken to her by the Lord’.

As Mary hears her cousin’s expression of these understandings (and as she sees also that Gabriel’s words about Elizabeth were true), her own angelic encounter receives both a confirmation and a further illumination of its content and she too begins to speak. Her hymn of praise seems at first sight to be simply following the usual form for such things – an opening expression of praise followed by a list of reasons for this. However the Magnificat has its own very distinctive structure and patterns of verb usage and of particular interest here is the connection and yet difference between its two stanzas.

Each is marked by a distinct ending (49b–50 and 54b–55) which contrast with what has gone before but which resemble each other in poetic form and content – each interpreting God’s intervention as mercy and goodwill (*eleos*) shown to his covenant people. Whilst the two stanzas themselves are also connected linguistically by their verbs and the way these are placed, there is a significant difference between them with regard to their content. Here again we see another stage of the evolving understanding which this cascading exchange generates: in the first iteration, Mary’s expressed reason for rejoicing is *personal* – it is as if Elizabeth’s words of confirmation allow her to fully accept and respond to what is going to happen to her. However in the second stanza Mary makes a leap from the personal to the societal as the sphere of God’s action which she celebrates expands to involve whole groups – the hungry, the lowly, the proud, the powerful and the rich are now also seen in connection with the outcome of her pregnancy: God’s grace to Mary outlined in the first stanza becomes paradigmatic for the work of God’s Kingdom outlined in the second stanza which Jesus has come to actualise. There is also a move away from the simple binary contrast of mighty God/lowly maidservant to a triangular tension in which God’s power elevates some while deposing others – the mighty God lifts those who have no power while frustrating those who do have it.[3] This is imagery which will later be reinforced prophetically by Simeon (2:34) in another of Luke’s paired encounters.

As a result of this exchange, both the women and Luke’s readers suddenly have a clearer vision of God’s purposes. And woven through this prophetic cascade is Luke’s great theme of hospitality – the question of how the visitor will be received and of what results from this. Elizabeth’s gesture of hospitality as she welcomes Mary quickly assumes an even greater significance as the realisation of Mary’s pregnancy dawns: Mary is unmarried and pregnant – a situation which would usually lead to disgrace, judgement and ostracism (or worse). Instead she is welcomed with joy and honour – because Elizabeth recognises and acknowledges that Mary is herself giving hospitality to God. During the three months which Mary spends with Elizabeth, her situation will also become apparent to others but she is shielded from shame by Elizabeth’s hospitality, acceptance and understanding. We could easily imagine that this time together not only continues to expand both women’s understanding of what is to happen but that it also helps Mary prepare for the difficulties which will lie ahead as she returns to her home town and her pregnancy becomes known there.

[1]Brendan Byrne, *The Hospitality of God: A Reading of Luke’s Gospel* (Collegeville, Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 2000) p.4

[2]ibid p.24

[3]For a more in–depth coverage of the Magnificat’s poetic structures see:

Joel B. Green, *The Gospel of Luke* (Grand Rapids, Michigan/Cambridge, UK: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1977) p 98–99

Robert C. Tannehill, *The Narrative Unity of Luke Acts: A Literary Interpretation, Vol 1: The Gospel according to Luke* ( Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986/1991) pp. 26–32

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## Response

In this passage two puzzling and incompletely understood scenarios are illuminated and expanded by being brought together in a meeting held and kept safe by hospitality. Both the women directly involved and Luke’s wider audience

end up with a clearer vision of God's purposes for themselves and for the society and the world in which they live.

This is a pattern we see repeatedly across Luke's Gospel and it is one which is helpful in the context of conflict scenarios – which are often complex, and in which no one person has complete knowledge of, or unclouded insight into, all aspects. Sometimes different pieces of the puzzle, or different agents in the situation, need to be brought together in order for progress in understanding and action to happen. And, just as here, such evolutions also need the time and space to develop.

However this can be a difficult and fraught undertaking in a conflict situation – and this is where the notion of hospitality becomes important. How do we make safe spaces – physical/intellectual/emotional/spiritual/political/cultural etc. – where such interactions could potentially happen? What might such places look like? How should we prepare and behave if we were hosting or facilitating such a space? How should we prepare and behave if we are participating in it?

You are invited to reflect on some of these questions – perhaps with respect to a conflict situation in which you are currently involved in some way. Hospitality is a theme which often crops up in these reflections and you might find it helpful to review some past explorations of this: you can search for the term in all reflections from the last 5 years of writing via the search box on the website (note that in order to access readings from both cycles, you will need to check the boxes for both cycle 1 and cycle 2 in the 'refine by' menu below the search box).

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## Prayer

Jesus –  
your life began and ended  
held by the hospitality  
of a woman's womb and a borrowed tomb,  
and your journey between  
was filled with life-changing encounters  
and horizon-expanding conversations,  
all held in the safety of a hospitable heart.

Help us as we too try to walk this pathway:  
may the hospitality we offer  
to those we meet on the way  
be open and generous  
courteous and caring  
ready to listen and to share  
so that insights can be clarified  
and understanding grow.

Amen