

THE FEAST OF VISITATION AT FAIRACRES 2019

+

This joyful feast gives a precious glimpse into the wider family of Jesus and indicates the great importance of the support and nurture that was given to him and to his cousin, John, by these faithful Jewish believers. The enthusiasm and kindness of Mary as a young teenage mother-to-be was embraced by the steadfast faithfulness of Elizabeth, whose sensitivity prompted her recognition of the deep significance of what was happening to them both. Thus two sides of such visitation are demonstrated: generous compassion met by receptive sensitivity, bringing the presence of God's Spirit very near.

These principles govern the whole pastoral ministry of the Church in parishes across the country. One of the reasons for a residential ministry is that a priest should visit his or her people, both those who go to Church and those who are neighbours. Indeed all residents of a parish are by default members of the Church of England, and in country villages the beneficial impact of this relationship can still be felt. In our benefice, we guarantee a visit within the week of being alerted to some need by churchwardens and others. Obviously funerals require visits as well, and how these are handled is of decisive pastoral priority and importance. They also inspire confidence in the pastoral availability and competence of a local priest.

More generally, the privilege of a parish priest is to be able to spend time with people, with no strings attached and entirely confidentially. Indeed generous listening in the first instance will often expedite subsequent visits and decisions. The key is to take an encouraging interest in the whole of a person's life. The kitchen table often becomes the week-day altar, as people tell the whole story of their life and of their family. This kind of holistic listening and affirmation is clearly much needed in our society. At funerals, and also at some weddings, a priest is drawn right into the intimate heart of a family. It is certainly a great education in the richness of human nature.

At least once a month, there comes a moment when a priest finds himself or herself in the right place at the right moment, or able to respond immediately to an urgent call to visit someone sick or dying in a home or hospital. This is a great privilege, as a priest is there to support families round tight corners; for no home or family is immune from the four 'D's': disease, depression, divorce and death. In such situations the experienced care of someone dispassionate, kind and confidential can be essential and life-giving, both at the time and in the memory long afterwards. By the same token, ineptitude or lack of serious care can leave a real scar in the memory for many years and alienate people from the Church.

In a monastery, visitation is experienced from the other end, as it were. How guests are received is the crucial test of how genuine such a Christian community actually is. As the *Rule of St Benedict* instructs us: 'let guests be received as if they were Christ himself.' Many visitors to your community are blessed by how you receive them, by the prayerfulness of Chapel and the kindness of hospitality. This is a place where people encounter God, and it is always a privilege to be part of your life, however briefly. Sensitivity and expectation should therefore govern how guests are received. Patient listening and dispassionate support are

something that a monastery can give to any person or their family, often over many years of friendship.

The joyful mystery at the heart of the feast is the fact that within the loving relationship between Mary and Elizabeth the Holy Spirit made his presence felt. The first kick of the child in the womb in response to Mary's arrival not only assured the elderly mother that all was well, it also signified in her mind a moment of prophetic recognition of the significance of Mary's pregnancy. The story certainly puts the focus on the crucial importance of pregnancy and therefore the sanctity of the child in the womb. Clearly Mary felt at home with Elizabeth and as a result the *Magnificat* poured forth from her soul in a way neither of them ever forgot.

Christian pastoral visitation, given and received, is always part of a continuing dialogue of God's love with people, often through other people who care for them. The lives of individuals and of families can indeed be changed by such generous and sensitive kindness, as a visit can be a means of God's grace and presence. The foundation of all Christian visitation is therefore prayer: being open to the call of God through the needs of others, and being sensitive to the whole of their reality. We have to pray earnestly that our response will always help and never hinder the loving compassion of God, remembering the words of Jesus, who said that in showing compassion to others we show compassion to him. In the need of the stranger and the afflicted person, Christ himself draws nigh.

This feast also intimates the great ministry of sensitive compassion that has been the hall-mark of Mary's continuing ministry in the life of the Church and the world as the Mother of God. Our visitations, given and received, are only the humble outskirts of the divine mission of human salvation, in which she continues to support the redemptive work of her Son, our Lord Jesus Christ.

© Douglas Dales: 2019