

Homily for the Feast of the Visitation

Gerard Manly Hopkins was received into the Roman Catholic Church from Anglicanism by John Henry Newman in 1866 at the age of 26. Ordained a Catholic priest and Jesuit, Father Hopkins was a renowned English Poet. One of his most famous poems, *May Magnificat* celebrates the association between this month and our Lady. Part of the poem asks:

What is Spring?—
Growth in everything—
Flesh and fleece, fur and feather,
Grass and green world all together;

Star-eyed strawberry-breasted
Throstle above her nested
Cluster of bugle blue eggs thin
Forms and warms the life within;

And bird and blossom swell
In sod or sheath or shell.

All things rising, all things sizing
Mary sees, sympathising
With that world of good,
Nature's motherhood.

Their magnifying of each its kind
With delight calls to mind
How she did in her stored
Magnify the Lord.

Well but there was more than this:
Spring's universal bliss
Much, had much to say
To offering Mary May.

Now we might not grasp the intricacies language and all of the allusions Hopkins states in these stanzas, however, we can hear how the forming of the words gives to the poem a fecundity and movement like the month of May. There is a vitality to the month of May that makes the celebration on its last day, The Visitation of Mary to Elizabeth, particularly meaningful.

We are told that when Mary heard of Elizabeth's pregnancy she went with haste to her cousin. There is movement, vitality and purpose to Mary's action, much like the month of May. The word "haste" not only means "with speed", but there is also an implication of motive as well. It means to be done eagerly and with earnestness. She desired to go. Why is that? Well of course

on one level she wanted to be with her older cousin in her time of need. However, in that we remember this encounter whenever we pray the Rosary suggests to us there is more going on here than meets the eye.

That something more is better understood when we see the connection between Mary's visit to Elizabeth and David bringing the Ark of the Covenant into Jerusalem. Throughout the Old Testament we hear of a successor for David who will come from the City of David, Bethlehem. What did David do? He brought together the tribes of Israel, First Hebron in the south and then the tribes from the north came too. He brings them together and then establishes Jerusalem as his capital. Into the capital he brings the Ark of the Covenant so that this unified nation would worship God together. And then by the very clarity and beauty of its worship it would draw all the tribes of the world together. That is the story of David.

Notice how it is happening in the story of the Visitation. David brought the Ark of Covenant into Jerusalem and with reckless abandon he danced before the Ark (2 Samuel 6.16).

Look at the overtones here. Mary comes into the hill country of Judah. That is exactly where David found the Ark. Here is Mary the true Ark of the Covenant. The ark contained remnants of the Ten Commandments and the Manna from the wilderness wanderings. Mary contained in her womb the word of God and the Bread of Life. How wonderful it is that just as David dances before the Ark, so too in the womb, John the Baptist does his own kind of Davidic dance before the true Ark of the Covenant, Mary.

This is why, Elizabeth exclaims "Blessed are you among woman" The Ark was the most revered Holy Object in Israel and here is the Blessed one, more holy still.

In response to Elizabeth's beatitude Mary sings out her Magnificat, proclaiming God's greatness as her soul magnifies him.

This is what I want you to appreciate today. At one level the visitation is a very ordinary story, two women pregnant with what will be their first and only children, are together celebrating their fruitful wombs. And yet here is the story told that brings about the salvation of the world. These women knew that they were part of an unfolding drama that would change the world.

When we grasp that our stories are part of this story it does two things for us. Although the unfolding of our lives has a pattern and routine that is in very ordinary, there is no ordinary life. For we are also caught up in this story of Salvation. When we see more clearly the connection between the bible story and our story we too like Mary and the month of May discover a purposefulness and vitality captured so beautifully in Hopkins poem and by the verb "haste".

In the Collect this purposeful way of life is captured as we prayed:

Grant us we pray, that, faithful to the promptings of the Spirit may magnify your greatness with the Virgin Mary at all times.