

Visitation

There is something beautifully poignant about the meeting of these two women, cousins, both carrying miraculous children in their wombs who will complete the plan of God for our salvation, John, the last prophet of the Old Testament and Jesus the Messiah he came to announce. As the women reach out to embrace and their swelling wombs touch, they form a bridge between the Old and the New Testament. Even before their bodies touch, as soon as Mary's greeting reaches the ears of Elizabeth, the unborn John leaps with joy at the closeness of his Saviour and Elizabeth instantly knows she is in the presence of the Mother of God. She is overwhelmed at the honour paid her, and yet Mary is only paying her family duty having learned that Elizabeth was pregnant. She has come to be with her cousin and assist her in the last three months of her confinement until John is born.

What can we learn from this encounter? What does it teach us? What lessons does it hold for us? Track forward to the end of Jesus' life where his mother is at the foot of the cross with the disciple John, a different John, of course, and recall how Jesus gave them each into the other's keeping and gave Mary the role of Mother of the Church, to be a role model and advocate for us. As such, she models for us in a perfect way, how we should conduct our own relationship with God.

At the Annunciation, only a moment's uncertainty precedes her 'yes' to become the one who will bring Christ into the world. In this she shows us how we are to respond to God's invitation to us to be, like Mary, bearers of Christ to the world. We may think that in this Mary has an unfair advantage because the Christ child can only be conceived in her because she herself was conceived immaculate. We, on the other hand, are sinners. How can we bear Christ within us in

anything like the same way? Because, in fact, we, too, have our own kind of 'immaculate conception'.

When we are baptized we are reborn without sin and at that moment, Christ comes to dwell within us through the Holy Spirit. We become, for ever, bearers of Christ, "Christophers" if you like. Of course, future falls into sin can blur and weaken the likeness of Christ in us, but it is always there and it is best seen in those who are purified by deprivation and suffering. Those who are closest to God's heart are the poor, the sick, the hungry and thirsty, the broken-hearted, those who hunger and thirst for justice. Jesus reminds us that he is very strongly present in these, the disadvantaged, and he also teaches us that we are most Christlike when we minister to these less fortunate out of love. Then is the sin that weakens the life of Christ in us overpowered by our act of love, for, as Jesus himself teaches, 'Love covers a multitude of sins'.

And so, this story of the Visitation also has something to teach us. Like Mary, we are so to carry Christ within us, so to allow his life to radiate from us that, in any encounter with another, his presence may be visible in our love, and may reach out to the other, whatever their need.