

Views from the Pews

Mary's Journey

Many accounts have Mary as under 20 when she was visited by Gabriel. If so, Luke 1;39 is worth looking into. The 'Lord's handmaid' gets up, packs, and embarks on what seems to be a 80-100 mile journey, to the Judean hill country, west perhaps of the Dead Sea and probably east of Bethlehem. Luke does not record whether she went on foot, or whether by caravan. She is pregnant. Her main purpose seems to be to connect with Elizabeth, who is "hiding" (1;24). We can probably infer Mary's intentions from her 3-month stay. But whatever the motivation, it is an extraordinary journey, and reveals a different side to Mary. Obedient yes, but also courageous, and full of initiative.

Many mothers recall with fondness the connections they made at ante-natal class; this is a likely take on Mary and Elizabeth's relationship, and on the long journey, which was inherently dangerous even if undertaken with others. Traditionally, Luke had some medical training, and seems to write with some insight into Jewish attitudes to conception and pregnancy. Mary goes home again before John's birth. A round trip of up to 200 miles even allowing for the fact that there were trade routes up and down the Jordan valley.

Luke 1;46 sees the beginning of what we know as the 'Magnificat', probably Mary's greatest gift to us. It begins with themes of lowliness and obedience, but rapidly progresses to a vivid description of God. Although written in the past tense, it is a song of revolution, and reveals to us the full depth of Mary's insight. Not for nothing does Vivaldi impart a swagger to his setting of this piece – this is God on the move, in control, giving full effect to His plans. And it is Mary, still possibly footsore and certainly undertaking care of Elizabeth, who sings the song.

Society in general, and the Church in particular, remain obsessed with women's roles, appearance, and agency generally. The Bible is sometimes used to enforce societal boundaries for women, particularly when it comes to reproduction. Luke seems to reveal something different. Both Mary and Elizabeth emerge as heroines of the Advent story. We confine Mary at our peril.

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