



The Parish Churches of S Philip and S Augustine and S Matthew with S Mary the Virgin Newcastle

Homily for Feast of the Visitation of the BVM to Elizabeth (31st May) 2026

The events of the today's festival - the Visitation of the Blessed Virgin Mary to Elizabeth - are a somewhat curious episode at first glance. One could be forgiven for thinking that Saint Luke makes rather more of the completely natural phenomenon of a kicking baby in the womb than the experience really merited.

However, the narrative makes a number of important points, which the reader should have in mind as Gospel unfolds. Several of them are enwrapped in the inclusion of what we call the *Magnificat*, from its first word in the Latin rendering of the text - or, in these more demotically driven times, the *Song of Mary*.

In fact, it is only Mary's song insofar as she recited it on this occasion. It is likely that the text - or at least a version of it - was a piece of existing material, which Saint Luke included in his account.

It is an interesting passage, because, although the *Visitation* follows on directly from the *Annunciation*, there is no reference to the coming Birth of Jesus. Rather, it comprises a catena of quotations of and allusions to texts from the Old Testament: not least, the *Canticle of Hannah* in the Former Book of Samuel.

Hannah's song celebrates the alleviation by God of the suffering and oppression of the poor - or those of low estate, as it puts it. However, it is not simply the fact of their poverty or disadvantage, which sees them raised; but that, having lives uncluttered by worldly concerns, they are available through for God's rescuing action by recognising their complete dependence on Him. We might think of the "Poor in spirit," cited in the Beatitudes of Saint Matthew's Gospel.

This was a theme stretching back to the period following the return from exile in Babylon. The *Anawim*, as such people were called, played an important part in the religious life of post-Exilic Israel; and it might be that it was in such circles that a version of the *Magnificat* was developed.

More importantly, for our purposes, it was the heirs to the *Anawim*, who would be if not *the*, then *a* focus of Jesus' coming Ministry. His was not going to be a movement reliant on worldly power, but on humility before God. Mary had already exhibited such a demeanour in her *Fiat Mihi* - be it unto me according to Thy Word; we might even say that this was in this context of humility before God that Jesus was conceived.

Interestingly, some early Latin manuscripts assign the *Magnificat* not to Mary, but to Elizabeth, the mother of the prophet in her womb; and some New Testament scholars consider this to be a more accurate record of the author's original text. If so, Saint John the Baptist's mother acted almost as her son's spokeswoman, prophesying on his behalf the character and significance of Jesus' future preaching, teaching and example.

The events of the Visitation, therefore, provide the readers of the Gospel through the centuries with a lens through which to read the account, which follows: an indication that we should be bringing a focus of humility before and dependence on God to our interpretation of the narrative: not least, in understanding why Mary is, "Blessed amongst women;" an exemplar of that attitude - indeed, the proto-exemplar of the New Covenant era.