

## 1. Mary and Elizabeth (Companions on the Journey)

We are going to share in a series of five Bible studies over the next two days – four today and one tomorrow. I want to explore the theme of moving and travelling on by reflecting on the transitions which Mary, the mother of Jesus, made in the course of her life. Each of the Bible studies will be illustrated by a picture. The first picture is already visible on the screen. This painting is called Mary and Elizabeth and before I tell you anymore about it let's hear the Bible passage on which it is based:

LUKE 1:26-45

When I was candidating for the ministry, the residential panel was at Queen's College in Birmingham. I was allocated a room which was normally inhabited by one of the students and her CD's and books and pictures etc were still there. I immediately felt a connection with this person whose room I was in. I really liked her taste in art and music and reading material and when I was accepted for the ministry and started training at Queen's myself she and I met. I told her that I had stayed in her room and had felt myself so at home there and we became very close friends. I am god-mother to one of her children and this painting was an ordination present to me from this friend. Her name is Magdalen. She is an Anglican priest and an artist.

When Magdalen told me that she wanted to give me a picture for my ordination she asked me which Biblical character or story I would like her to paint. I told her that I wanted Mary and Elizabeth because I felt that my relationship with her is like the relationship which Mary had with Elizabeth. Magdalen is a role-model for me. She is the kind of priest or minister I long to be. She has the courage to take risks. She is in touch with her own passions and emotions and enables others to express theirs. She believes in being "real" even when this is costly. She follows her heart, listens to her soul, nurtures her body and stimulates her mind. Her relationship with her husband and children also deeply moves me.

Magdalen is the person I turn to when something happens in my life which I need to share. I know that whatever I say to her will find an echo in her experience. The child will leap in her womb as it were. Magdalen will be ready to dance for joy with me when I have something to celebrate – but she will also feel a surge of pain at the core of her being when I ring her up in floods of tears.

This painting illustrates the connection between the two women. They flow into one another. They are held together. They are both in touch with what is going on inside the other. And they stand in a kind of doorway which is a place of transition. These are women who are rooted together in one place – and Luke says that Mary stayed with Elizabeth for about three months – and yet they are also women in transition. Something has stirred within both of them and the wave which cascades out from them at the bottom of the picture is symbolic of that movement.

The journey to Elizabeth is the first transition which Mary makes in the gospel story. Up until then all that we know about her is that she had grown up in Nazareth. Paintings of the Annunciation normally depict Mary in a very static way. She is sitting reading or praying or simply looking out of the window when the Angel Gabriel appears. But as soon as the angel has left her, she is off! The NRSV says that Mary went “with haste” to a Judean town in the hill country where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. We have no idea whether Mary stopped to tell her parents or Joseph or whether anyone escorted her on her journey. All we are told is that she went with haste!

These were the days before text messages and email or even phone calls and telegrams. The only way to share news with someone was to go in person. And Mary needed to share her news with someone. This was not something she could keep to herself. And thankfully, she did not even have to find the words to explain what had happened because Elizabeth instantly knew why Mary had come. She was filled with the Holy Spirit and exclaimed with a loud cry: “Blessed are you among women and blessed is the fruit of your womb?”

Sometimes, however, it can be very difficult for us to articulate the transition which is going on inside us. You may have been with people - or been such a person yourself – who clearly has something they need to communicate but don't know how to do it. I know for myself that I need people to ask the right questions before I can tell them what I am feeling deep within. And it has to be not just the right question but the right person asking it. I won't open up to just anyone. I have to trust that they will be able to receive what I am giving.

The physical journey which Mary makes into the hill country to see Elizabeth is also an emotional journey – and a journey which marks a transition in their relationship. Mary has chosen to share with Elizabeth the most momentous and life-changing encounter with God that she has ever had. The three months those women spent together must have been deeply moving for them both. There is no Biblical record of them ever meeting again. But the time they spent together at this major time of transition in both of their lives must have been formative and enriching for them both.

It was not until I started looking at this painting in preparation for this weekend that I noticed that Mary and Elizabeth do not have any feet – or at least they are not visible in the painting. I want to draw your attention to that because although this weekend is about moving and travelling on it is also an opportunity for us to stop all the coming and going we are normally involved in at weekend and engage in table-talk with one another. This is your opportunity to experience something of what Mary and Elizabeth shared in the time they spent together. I am sure that as you talk you will find echoes of your experience in what other people say. You have not chosen the people with whom you have been placed. There may be things which you do not feel comfortable sharing. And that's okay. But we invite you now to spend some time discussing the questions on the sheets which are about to be distributed. We will not be expecting you to feed any of this back to the whole group. This is just to help each table move closer together and learn more about what they have in common – just as Mary and Elizabeth did.

## Mary and Elizabeth

1. Where would you normally be going to “with haste” this weekend?
2. Who is an “Elizabeth”/role-model/agony aunt in your life?
3. What has already stirred within you this weekend in response to what someone else has said?
4. When have you had news or an experience which you urgently needed to share with someone? Whom did you share it with?
5. If a friend wanted to paint a picture for you, what would you ask them to paint?