

COUSINS WHO CHANGED THE WORLD

“Then said Mary unto the angel, how shall this be, seeing I know not a man? And the angel answered and said unto her, The Holy Ghost shall come upon thee, and the power of the Highest shall overshadow thee, therefore also that holy thing which shall be born of thee shall be called the Son of God. And behold, thy cousin Elisabeth, she hath also conceived a son in her old age, who was called barren. For with God nothing shall be impossible. And Mary said, Behold the handmaid of the Lord; be it done to me according to thy word” [Lk 1:34-38]

*At the height of the Arab-Israeli War 1973, the Israelis had repulsed the Egyptian forces that had scored initial successes by crossing the Suez Canal and seizing part of the Canal’s east bank in the Israeli-occupied Sinai Peninsula. The Egyptians had been driven back across the Red Sea and Cairo, the Egyptian Capital, was within 100 kilometres of Israeli artillery. **Anwar Sadat**, the then President of Egypt, appealed to **Henry Kissinger**, the then American Secretary of State, to prevail on **Golda Meir**, the then Israeli Prime Minister, to halt the attacks and respect the peace resolutions passed by the United Nations Security Council. With American influence on Israel, the war soon ended, marking the beginning of the search for permanent peace between the Arabs and Israel.*

If you look at the three key personalities mentioned above, you will be struck by a remarkable coincidence. Sadat, an Arab, was a descendant of Ishmael, the son of Abraham by Hagar [Gen. 16:1-12]. Golda Meir and Henry Kissinger (an American Jew) were of the lineage of Isaac, Abraham’s son by Sarah [Gen. 17:19]. In a way, therefore, all three were blood relations. We are saying that, in one brief moment in October 1973, the fate of world peace lay in the hands of these three cousins! But, some two thousand years earlier, there was even a more remarkable parallel.

***Elisabeth**, the mother of John the Baptist, was **the cousin of Mary, the mother of Jesus** [Lk 1:38]. For accepting to play the roles that God had assigned to them, these two cousins changed the world **forever!** As we mark the season of Christmas, when we commemorate the birth of the Messiah, I thought it a useful thing to underline the roles that little people like us can play as labourers in God’s vineyard. Elisabeth and Mary were two simple women, one old and barren, the other young and virgin. By their faith, they made themselves available for God’s salvation plan. Let us learn something about them for our own walk. That is the purpose of today’s lesson.*

1. Background: the period between the Testaments¹

At the close of the Old Testament [**Haggai, Zechariah & Malachi**], the dominant world power was Persia, with Aramaic as the international language. However, the New Testament opens with Rome as the sole world power, with Greek as the international language. The period, 420 B.C. – A.D., the “years of silence,” is not covered in the Protestant Bible, but some of the *Apocrypha* books [e.g., **Sirach, Ecclesiasticus, the Maccabees**] found in the Catholic Bible carry some of the key developments during that period. Knowledge of what transpired during the “years of silence” will help us to understand the shaping of culture and faith that we find in Palestine at the beginning of the New Testament. The following should be noted:

a) Persian legacy: 639 B.C.- 336 B.C.

The House of David, the source of leadership for Israel for over five centuries, had lost political and religious prominence. Probably, Zerubbabel was the last lineal descendant of David to function in a leadership position in the period after the exile [**Zech. 4:6-10**]. Consequently, the high priest assumed religious and civil leadership of Judaea and of the scattered Jewish communities outside of Palestine. The need for a written account of the word of God and its oral interpretation took on added urgency [**Neh. 8:8**] during this period.

b) Encounter with Greek civilization: 336 B.B.-200 B.C.

Persia was conquered by Alexander the Great of Macedon [336-323 B.C.], who had seized the vast Persian empire of Darius III, stretching from Egypt to Babylon. Alexander “advanced to the ends of the earth and plundered many nations and the earth was quiet before him” [**1 Macc. 1:3**]. Greek became the official language of the world as the engine to spread Hellenistic civilization throughout the then known world. However, with the death of Alexander in 323 B.C., the vast Greek empire disintegrated. That opened the way for Jewish revolts against foreign domination.

The tension between Hellenism [Greek culture] and Judaism came to a head when certain Jewish leaders built a Greek gymnasium in Jerusalem and repudiated circumcision and the covenant [**1 Macc. 1: 11-15**]. The revolt that followed brought into prominence the Maccabee brothers. In 165 B.C., under Judas the eldest of the Maccabee brothers, the Jews won religious freedom, reclaimed Mount Zion and re-consecrated the temple. This event is marked till date by the feast of *Hannukah*.

¹ The ideas used in this section are taken from William L. Lane, Th. D., “Between the Testaments” in *The King James Red Lettered Bible*, The Publisher, P.O. Box 2273, Palm Beach, Florida 33480; pp 1385-1391

Rivals to the Maccabees soon came on board, leading to the establishment of several hegemonies which were not any better than what the Greeks had tried to achieve. In fact, the priesthood had become secularized, and although some semblance of independence was maintained for about 80 years, the ascendancy of Rome was in the horizon.

c) Roman intrusion: 200 B.C. –onward

Civil war among local rivals for political control of Judaea brought in the Romans in support of their allies [**1 Macc. 12:1**]. The Romans imposed their rule, and appointed those loyal to them to key positions, irrespective of their standing among the Jews. For example, Herod, the son of Antipater, was actually an Arab usurper with secular ambitions. Nevertheless, he was appointed king of Judaea by the Roman Senate and kept in power by the armies of Mark Anthony. Therefore, the people never could like him. The Herod who tried to kill Jesus in infancy came from that lineage [**Matt. 2:13-15**].

The majority of the Jews had lost hope in an earthly solution. For almost 400 years, God had not spoken by prophets or by any other means. The few who could not take the desecration of Judaism continued the fight in a different way. One group were the *Pharisees* [the separated ones] who vowed to die rather than break the Mosaic law. Their main rivals were the *Sadducees* [the righteous ones], made up of the temple aristocracy. The priestly sects took to the Judaeian wilderness. In fact, withdrawing into the wilderness became the vogue for those who wanted to prepare the way for the coming of the Messiah.

We see from the foregoing that at the time in history when Elisabeth and Mary featured, only a few people still kept alive the prophetic faith of the Old Testament *unadulterated*. Among these people were:

- ✓ The priest Zechariah and his barren wife, Elisabeth
- ✓ The carpenter Joseph and his betrothed wife, Mary
- ✓ The old prophet Simeon and widowed prophetess Anna

In deed, with God, nothing is impossible [**Lk 1:37**].

2. About Elisabeth and Mary

a) Elisabeth

Zechariah had just returned from the temple dumb. Being a priest was no longer as prestigious as it used to be in the days of king Solomon. Then, 120 priests would be on duty at the same time and “the priests could not stand to minister by reason of the cloud: for the glory of the Lord had filled the house

of God” [2 Chron. 6:12,14]. There was so much food for the priest’s household because the congregation “sacrificed sheep and oxen, which could not be told nor numbered for multitude” [2 Chron. 5:6]. Now, Zechariah and his wife could hardly make both ends meet.

On his return from the temple, Zechariah beckoned to his wife to bring writing materials. Then, he detailed for her his encounter with archangel Gabriel, the promise of a son who would be named John, and the ministry he was to have as the precursor of the Messiah. Their son would come in the spirit and power of Elijah and would be great in the sight of God. John would be filled with the Holy Spirit right from his mother’s womb. Consequently, their son was not expected to drink wine or hot drink throughout his life [Lk 1: 11-17]. He, Zechariah, had been struck dumb by the angel because he had doubted the message, and he would remain in that state till the child was born.

Elisabeth was barren, and she and her husband had become “well stricken in years” [Lk 1:7]. In other words, she had reached her menopause. Yet, “they were both righteous before God, walking in all the commandments and ordinances of the Lord blameless” [v. 6]. To compound that situation, the old priest had now returned from his tour of duty in the temple “dumb, and not able to speak” [v.20]. How come she did not do like Job’s wife, saying to her husband, “dost thou still retain thine integrity? Curse God and die” [Job 2:9]?

This daughter of Aaron refused to doubt her God! She believed her husband’s story. How did I know that? She agreed to have marital relations with him! “Elisabeth conceived, and hid herself five months” [v. 24]. She later gave birth to John the Baptist. We shall come back to the story later.

b) Mary

When Elisabeth was six months pregnant, the same angel [Gabriel] appeared to her cousin, Mary, a virgin who had been engaged to a carpenter, Joseph, of the lineage of David. The angel told her of God’s plan for her to be the mother of His Son, Jesus, the Saviour of the world, who would also be given the throne of His father, David [Lk 1:26-35]. She was staggered by that announcement. Remember, she was still an innocent teenager, living in a society where adultery was punished with stoning to death [Jn 8:3-5]. Her mother had taught her that the only legitimate pregnancy she should carry would be from her husband, Joseph. Therefore, her question to the angel was logical, “how shall this be, seeing I know not a man?” [Lk 1:34]. As soon as she understood how God would do it, she accepted the responsibility of being the mother of the Messiah with the following profound statement, “behold the handmaid of the Lord, be it unto me according to thy word” [v. 38].

As soon as she became pregnant, Mary went boldly over to visit her cousin, Elisabeth, as if to encourage her to stop hiding and come out with pride. The

visit turned out to be a huge revival service! Elisabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit and little John “leaped in her womb” for joy. Mary replied with the *Magnificat* [Lk 1: 46-55], one of the most beautiful praise songs in the Bible. Mary spent three months with her cousin, and left just when Elisabeth was due to deliver, a remarkable show of love and service to an older relative [v. 56].

3. The demonstration of their faith

Elisabeth and Mary walked by faith all their lives. For example:

- When Mary visited the much older Elisabeth, it was the latter that said, “blessed art thou among women and blessed is the fruit of thy womb. And whence is this to me that the mother of my Lord should come to me?” [Lk 1:42-43]. An average woman would be envious of her younger cousin for getting the bigger catch!
- When John was born, Elisabeth’s cousins and neighbours came for his circumcision and named him “Zechariah Jr.” but his mother refused, insisting instead on the name, John, which the angel had given [vv. 59-60].
- Mary passed through enormous hardships to travel from Nazareth to Bethlehem to have her baby in a manger [Lk 2: 1-7]. It was another ordeal to flee with Him to Egypt to avoid Herod’s persecution [Matt. 2:14-23].
- Mary was a major pillar in Her Son’s ministry, without drawing any attention to herself. See how she influenced her Son to perform His first miracle at the Wedding in Cana. Even there, she laid down a principle for all followers of Jesus, “whatsoever He saith unto you, do it” [Jn 2:5]. She was there all the way with her Son to Calvary where He was crucified [Jn 19:25]. After His ascension, she was there with the 120 disciples in the upper room, awaiting the coming of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost Sunday [Acts 1:14].
- In spite of the fact that she had other children, such as James, Joses, Juda, Simon and unnamed daughters] [Mk 6:3], she obeyed her firstborn Son’s order on the cross to be in the care of Apostle John [Jn 19:26-27].

4. Now they have changed the world by faith!

By their faith, Elisabeth and her cousin Mary changed the world. The coming of John the Baptist and of Jesus had been foretold in the Old Testament. John would come in the power and spirit of Elijah [Mal. 4:5], as the Lord’s messenger “and he shall prepare the way before Me” [Mal.3: 1]. The coming of the Seed of the woman was promised to Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden [Gen. 3: 15]. Over time, God gave more details about His Son who was to come in human flesh [see, for example, Is. 7:14; 9:6-7; Mic. 5:2]. When Elisabeth said, “yes” to God, John was born.

John’s ministry can be understood in contemporary times when we compare it with the role of the American air force in Afghanistan. The Northern Alliance forces were an ineffective group confined to a small corner of that country for so many years. In

its bid to rid Afghanistan of the Taliban who were harbouring Osama bin Laden, the man suspected to be behind the destruction of the World Trade Center Towers in New York on 11 September 2001, America bombed Taliban positions and destroyed their weapons and morale, thus softening, if not destroying their fighting power. In a matter of weeks, the Taliban have been driven out of power and reckoning by forces led by the Northern Alliance!

Before John, there had been no direct word from God for 400 years. Then, out of the blues, he came out asking people to repent and be baptized in preparation for the coming of the Saviour of the world [**Jn 1: 19-28**]. He was the one who baptized Jesus who inherited most of his disciples, such as Andrew, Peter's brother [**Jn 1: 33,40**]. As soon as he had met and baptized Jesus, John said, "this my joy therefore is fulfilled. He must increase, but I must decrease" [**Jn 3: 29b-30**]. Speaking of John, Jesus said, "among them that are born of women there hath not risen a greater than John the Baptist" [**Matt. 11:11**].

Mary's Son, Jesus, is Emmanuel, God with us. For saying, "yes" to God, Mary cooperated with God to fulfill His love for us by giving His Only Begotten Son to die in our place [**Jn 3:16**]. As a result, all of mankind has been reconciled with God. His birth in Bethlehem has brought joy and peace to a hopeless world. Now, time is measured from the date of His birth: before and after. The world has been changed forever!

5. Conclusion: you too can do it!

Jesus says that even though John the Baptist is the greatest among all of those born of women, the least person in the kingdom of God is greater than he was [**Matt.11: 11**]. By being born-again, we have become part of God's kingdom. Therefore, according to Jesus, we are greater than John the Baptist, and by inference, his mother, Elisabeth. When Jesus was told that His family members wanted to see Him, He "looked round about them which sat about Him and said, behold My mother and My brethren. For *whosoever* shall do the will of God, the same is My brother, and My sister, and mother" [**Mk 3:34-35**]. In other words, true believers are the cousins of Mary and Elisabeth!

Are you scared of the honour? Are you ready to accept the challenge with humility? As we mark this year's Christmas, let us ponder on that challenge that the Lord has thrown at us. Like Elisabeth and Mary, let us accept the challenge by faith and change the world around us.

Merry Christmas.