

## Fourth Sunday of Advent 2018

Micah 5.1-4

Hebrews 10.5-10

Luke 1.39-44

There is no established amount of normal foetal movement: expecting mothers are advised to monitor *changes*, rather than to compare their experience against some imagined standardised chart. The impact of a prenatal kick seems to peak at about 10 lbs of force, at roughly around the 30th week: in the final two months, there's too little room for baby to practise her roundhouse.<sup>1</sup>

There is, as far as I know, no clinical description of babes in wombs leaping for joy, not least because it's not clear what it would mean to ascribe such emotions to a baby that early on in development. But there are a plethora of studies on how babies, before they are born, respond to sound and light, and even their mothers' emotional states.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> <https://royalsocietypublishing.org/doi/full/10.1098/rsif.2017.0593#d16649e1122s>

<sup>2</sup> e.g., <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0378378200000748>; <https://journals.plos.org/plosone/article?id=10.1371/journal.pone.0129118>

So, maybe the prenatal leaping of our Baptizer-to-be says more about his mother Elizabeth than it does about his powers of womb-to-womb Messianic recognition.

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We find scenes of recognition all over the gospels, many of which follow a similar structure, also well-attested in classical Greek and Roman literature. First, there is ignorance or doubt; then, there is a moment of epiphany, which leads to devotion. Think, for example, of the supper at Emmaus, where the two disciples realise who it is they have been walking with all along, only when Jesus breaks the bread. “It is true!”, they report to the disciples, “The Lord is risen!” Think of Mary Magdalen at the tomb, finally seeing that it is her Lord who calls her by name. “Rabboni!” she exclaims in reply. Think of Doubting Thomas in the upper room, who upon touching Jesus’s hands and side falls down in worship: “My Lord, and my God!”.

There is also a slightly different trope, in which demons recognise Jesus immediately, but in so doing,

fear him. Their perceptual powers exceed those of the disciples, but they have no love for they one they know.

This story—about Mary and Elizabeth, John and Jesus—doesn't quite fit into either of these categories, and not only because two of the principle characters are babies yet to be born.

Like the demons and unlike the disciples after the resurrection, John recognises Jesus immediately, and Elizabeth too: there is no prior moment of ignorance or doubt. If anything, the moment of doubt comes later for John who, while imprisoned, wonders if Jesus was the one he had been waiting for after all.

And quite contrary to the demons, John simply and uncomplicatedly rejoices, just as the disciples and Mary Magdalene and Thomas eventually do; and, filled with the Holy Spirit, Elizabeth too, who calls her cousin blessed.

But the more interesting departure from other stories of recognition is, I think, that it is not anything that Jesus does that triggers the phenomenon, but his mother Mary's greeting. Furthermore, it is not John who is said to hear Mary's greeting, but Elizabeth, his

mother. John's recognition of the Lord is mediated by Elizabeth's reception of her cousin. Indeed, even John's response is mediated by Elizabeth, who articulates to Mary—and to us—that John has leapt for joy. Revelation, recognition, and response are, in this case, all shared acts, shared experiences rather than individual ones.

This peculiarity among stories of recognition does, of course, reflect something of the mystery of pregnancy and the relationship between mother and child therein: but it also bespeaks something of what it means to know Jesus, and how it is that we come to recognise him.

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These are, of course, difficult things to talk about, and those of us tempted to try would do well to notice Elizabeth and John's double act here. Elizabeth deigns to speak: blessed are you among women, she asserts, and the fruit of thy womb too. And we have followed her in this assertion ever since. John's joy is, in contrast, silent, though certainly expressive: he leaps in his mother's womb.

This, you might say, is largely a by-product of his underdeveloped vocal cords and linguistic abilities. I won't bore you with the details of human foetal laryngeal functioning, but it is an odd objection to make, in a story full of miracles, that it is a limitation in John's physiological and psychosocial development that renders him silent. In any case, as silent sermons are probably a little too avant-garde for this pulpit, I must risk the Elizabethan option even though the Johannine is probably ultimately preferable.

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Further on in Luke's gospel, decades after the events described in today's reading, Jesus observes that no prophet is accepted in his own country. There is a similar, if less dramatic, phenomenon often noted by clergy who are parents, as well as by Christian children in non-Christian households. Back home, when I was a teenager, it was a truism that "pastor's kids"—PKs as they were not quite affectionately abbreviated—were often rebellious and impious trouble-makers. Specifically, they were known to break hearts, and not just those of their parents, who like St Augustine's mother prayed for them with great if seemingly impotent forbearance.

And those of us who were converts before our parents were, regularly found our faith held against us, used as a source of guilt when we misbehaved: it made us feel like we were failing, not only as faithful children, but also as good witnesses of the gospel. It often seemed impossible to share our faith with the people we loved most, which became for many of us a source of great anguish.

The relationship between faith and family can be fraught. There is something of this in politics too, of course, and some of us may rediscover, if we are not careful, over Christmas dinner.

And yet, our families and close friends can be profound vehicles of revelation. I certainly owe my politics to my parents, and I like to think that I had something to do with their eventual conversion to Christianity. My own faith came out of my close friendships at school: Lee, the gentle and wise head boy; Joon, our choleric Dungeon's and Dragon's game master; Elaine, with beautiful worlds in her head from her love of books; Cassandra, whose mother and mine met while they were pregnant with us. I don't know if either of us leapt in their wombs.

I cannot tell you what it is they said or did that made the difference, because I don't think there is anything in particular at which to point. The point is that through them, I saw something of a gospel worth taking seriously, a God worthy of worship.

And so it is with all of us, if only we have the eyes to see the Christ they bear, our neighbours and friends and strangers, and even the family members we might otherwise find difficult, from whom we might even be estranged. If only we have the eyes to see that we too bear Christ for them, which is not meant as a burden upon us, but a grace, that even we—even our stressed and stropky Christmas selves—can fill people with God's spirit, make their hearts leap for joy.

I find this hard to believe myself, but that doesn't make it any less true. And I suspect that the believing itself has a funny way of making it true; a funny way of making it easier to hear God's voice in others; and, more miraculously still, of making us better, more transparent vessels of vessels of revelation, of the recognition that leads to love.

None of this is to guarantee that we get to see the fruits of God's work in us, of course: the effects of whatever glimpses of the gospel that are gleaned from our greetings may well remain as invisible as a prenatal leap, as silent as a jubilant cry yet unborn. It is, in the end, not our prerogative to know such things. Of all the things we get to control over Christmas, this is not one of them. Our calling is only to go, out to the hill country, full of the Christ who dares to choose us to bear him.