

‘Mary Went With Haste ...’

(Lk 1.39)

The mystery of the Visitation is of special significance to us for a variety of reasons. It celebrates the occasion of the Magnificat, which every legionary recites every day, and it represents our going to souls with Mary bearing Jesus. It establishes St John the Baptist, who is our patron, as precursor of salvation, and marks the cleansing of him from Original Sin. It depicts Mary as entering on her office as giver of grace. Likewise it is the moment when St Elizabeth, filled with the Holy Spirit as the scripture emphasises, declares Mary unique among women; and when Mary (no less inspired) declares of herself that all generations shall call her blessed. Note that the gospel which is always sparing of words, says that St Elizabeth cried out with a loud voice, meaning that this pronouncement of hers was to reverberate over the whole world and to be heeded by all ages. Quite an assembly of remarkable circumstances, you will agree.

St Luke had just finished telling the overwhelming details of the Incarnation, ascending to the terrific climax

when the angel said to Mary: 'The Holy Ghost shall come upon thee, and the power of the Most High shall overshadow thee, and therefore the Holy which shall be born of thee shall be called the Son of God.' Then at once the angel goes off at a sort of tangent: 'And behold thy cousin Elizabeth, she also hath conceived a son in her old age; and this is the sixth month with her that is called barren; because no word shall be impossible with God.' And Mary said, 'Behold the handmaid the Lord, be it done to me according to thy word.' And the angel departed from her (Lk 1:35-38).

The Incarnation had taken place. The angel departed, his mission done; and now begins the great mystery of the Visitation. St Luke resumes: 'And Mary rising up in those days, went into the hill country with haste, into a city of Juda. And she entered into the house of Zachary and saluted Elizabeth.'

How simply recounted is that journey of Mary. A few lines. Yet it has given rise to innumerable holy speculations by the spiritual writers. Why did Mary go? And when? And how? And to where? These circumstances are not so often popularly discussed, yet surely our minds should feed on them. So let us talk over them now.

In the first place, we must not take it as normal that Mary should suddenly drop everything and leave her affianced husband for three months to himself, all merely for the purpose of congratulating Elizabeth and rendering her some services. There was of course the bond that they were kinswomen. Moreover, it is believed that after the death of Mary's mother Zachary became her guardian. Nevertheless, there was no common reason for Mary's going. Elizabeth was of influential station and had no need of Mary's help. Neither was there any obligation

of courtesy. Elizabeth was keeping her condition secret. She had even gone into hiding. She had not sent word to Mary. It would be more natural for Mary to wait until the event would be announced, which would in the ordinary course be in a couple of weeks' time.

So we must look much deeper than the natural for the true reason. Did Mary go to check up on the angel's statement about Elizabeth? Decidedly not; for that would have meant slowness of belief which would put Mary into the category of Zachary, who had been struck dumb for his want of faith. Was it to tell her own secret to Elizabeth? No again; for she was keeping it from Joseph.

Was it because of the great role of Elizabeth's child? No. For Gabriel did not tell Mary what he had told Zachary about the future of that child. So Mary did not know. She only learned this from Elizabeth herself when they met.

So those reasons must be put aside. It is sufficiently evident that the angel's message somehow conveyed a peremptory intimation that Mary was to go. The note in the narrative is that of a prompt response to instructions given. The great writers insist that Mary's going was due to an irresistible impulse of the Holy Spirit.

Apparently her departure did not begin there and then. For the text says 'in those days,' which indicated some interval. It might be contended that this conflicts with the other statement that she went 'in haste'. No. I think the latter would have the meaning of 'as soon as possible'. Nor must we imagine Mary as all in a flutter, but as discharging a duty in full, orderly fashion. Mary's supernatural calm throughout the varying stages of her joys and martyrdom is a favourite theme of Fr Faber. She was never ruffled. She wore always that air of complete tranquillity and peace.

There would have to be preparations for such a journey and for the considerable absence which was in view. Mary would efficiently and swiftly set about these.

What explanation did Mary give to St Joseph? The fact that Elizabeth was with child was part of the angel's communication, but surely she did not tell that part alone to St Joseph. I think it is plain that she kept the apparition of the angel altogether to herself. For Joseph's subsequent behaviour is that of one who did not know that anything marvellous was on foot. This is quite extraordinary if we ponder over it. For it seems to lift Mary into a category of faith and self-control far exceeding ordinary human nature.

What was the town in Juda to which she went? The scholars have suggested nine different places, and have argued abundantly about the merits of each. The most likely would seem to be Ain-Karim. Its claim is based upon the most ancient traditions. This place is about five miles to the south-west of Jerusalem.

The time was, as we know, the end of March. This was Passover time. The prescribed visit to Jerusalem by St Joseph would be due. The parties travelling together would make the journey safe. It would seem to be the obvious course that Mary would wait and accompany Joseph on that part of the journey. Some there are who say that she went by herself. But this is not probable. St Ambrose declares that Mary never journeyed unescorted.

The distance from Nazareth to Jerusalem is eighty-nine miles and that would take the caravans five days to do. At night one stayed in inns or caravansaries, as they called them, sleeping on a mat.

This travelling was of extreme difficulty. Some of it lay through rugged mountains and by torrents interspersed with desert. The roads were hacked up by the considerable

traffic and were practically uncared for. Soon after that time they were put into order by the Romans.

The journey was through territory of great variety and of thrilling historical and religious associations. Leaving Nazareth, they passed out of Galilee, through the extensive plain of Esdraelon which at that season was like a sea of green corn; then across the hills of Samaria adorned with their orchards and vineyards. Down through nearly all of Judea, whose trees and shrubs were lovely in their spring finery. Roses were particularly in evidence. But everywhere the valleys and slopes would be clothed in flowers and in promise of fruits.

Every little thing in that journey had its overwhelming significance for Mary's mind, so richly stored with the biblical narrative. Every place had played some part in the chequered history of her people; each one struck a dear or painful chord in her heart. Two names must have stirred up new and wonderful thoughts in her: Bethel and Silo, in each of which are the Ark of the Covenant! After Silo, the holy city itself came into view.

There seems to be a sort of agreement that St Joseph did not go beyond Jerusalem and that Mary did the short stage of five miles on to Ain-Karim without him.

The Scripture describes Elizabeth as in a strict privacy, avoiding until the last moment the sensation which the publication of her miraculous pregnancy would cause. It is thought that she was residing at a country villa belonging to Zachary, a short way off from his house in Ain-Karim. St Helen built a church on the site of the villa which is still there as a ruin.

The visionaries say that Elizabeth was supernaturally warned of the coming visit of Mary and even that she spoke to others around her about it.

Now let us return to St Luke: 'Mary entered into the house of Zachary and saluted Elizabeth, and it came to pass that when Elizabeth heard the salutation of Mary, the infant leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Ghost' (Lk 1:40-41).

What would be the form of that salutation given by Mary? It is certain that it would be 'Peace be with you,' said while laying her hand upon her heart.

The moment Mary spoke, the spirit of prophecy filled Elizabeth and she declared the wonder which had been wrought in herself. Then she showed that by the same illumination she knew what had been done to Mary whose undying lustre she proceeds to proclaim:

'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? For behold as soon as the voice of thy salutation sounded in my ears, the infant leaped for joy. And blessed art thou that hast believed, because those things shall be accomplished that were spoken to thee by the Lord' (Lk 1:42-45).

These words 'Blessed among women,' exalted though they are, have not in translation adequately rendered the sense of the original which among the Hebrews would have denoted the loftiest superlative. One authority thus explains it: 'Among women thou alone canst be declared blessed. The blessing of others cannot at all be considered in comparison to thee.'

Mary responds with that hymn of hymns, the Magnificat - her confession that she is the Woman of the Ages, the expected virgin who is to bring forth the seed which shall save the world. Oh, what a moment! The theme of countless writers and painters, but eluded the genius of them all.

It is believed that Mary reached Elizabeth in the late afternoon. For this reason the Magnificat is assigned as the Evening Song of the Church.

At Mary's voice the secret of the Incarnation was revealed to Elizabeth, John was sanctified, the Holy Spirit filled Elizabeth and spoke through her to all generations. Herein is Mary exhibited in her permanent role in the Church: ever the giver of Jesus, ever his Co-adjutrix and his Mediatrix.

The scripture says that Mary stayed about three months and then returned home. Some think that Mary left before the birth of John. They are led to this conclusion by the fact that the following verse refers to the birth of John. This appears to indicate that it was a subsequent happening. Not so. Such is a regular feature in St Luke. He terminates an episode before going to speak of another one, which was taking place at the same time, and this sometimes puts two events out of proper sequence.

Many solid arguments justify the belief that Mary did not leave before the birth but stayed on. It would not be in accordance with the fullness of charity that Mary should leave at the very moment when her presence was most desirable. It is to be remembered that at Elizabeth's advanced age, the birth would be dangerous. Most of the ancient writers, including Origen, St Ambrose, and others, insist that Mary remained on for the birth of John and even to the circumcision on the eighth day.

St Bonaventure remarks that St John had the most wonderful of all nurses, Mary. That could not have been if she had not stayed for the event. Mary would conclude the mission on which she had come. She would finish what she had begun, that is the preparation of the precursor of her son. This would logically call for the taking of him in

her arms, the pressing of him close to Jesus with whose destinies he was inextricably linked; and she would bless him.

Also it would seem to require that she be present at the circumcision and at the miraculous conferring of his name. Another evidence would be that the details of the nativity of St John, of Zachary's cure, and of the prophecy of the Benedictus, were most likely communicated to St Luke by Mary herself, who would then be the only surviving human witness to those occurrences.

That three months' sojourn together of Mary and Elizabeth was a stupendous period. Those two women out of all humanity were the only ones who knew of the incarnation. The greatest happening of all time was a secret to them alone, and yet the cynic says that women cannot keep a secret!

Let us realise that not only the two women were there in those blissful meetings. Also their children were there unborn, the Messiah and his forerunner. Imagine Mary and Elizabeth talking and wondering and praying together in the constant presence of the mystery of Redemption, and with the Infant God in their midst.

In that place there is a spring, anciently called Nephtoa, but now named the Fountain of Mary. Its flow is not so abundant as formerly when it irrigated the valley. Mary and Elizabeth must frequently have sat beside it. Tradition tells that Mary often rested by its gushing waters, rejoicing at its noise and foam.

It is probable that she made all the swaddling clothes and the coverlet for St John, just as later she would do for her own son. She was an expert seamstress. Then arrived the birth of John and his circumcision. To the amazement of all, as emphasised by St Luke, the father signified that

the name was to be John. The kinsfolk and neighbours protested against this departure from a family name for they did not know that the name of John had been ordered by the angel.

Zachary insisted and immediately his tongue was unloosed from his dumbness and he spoke blessing God. Then he was filled with the Holy Spirit and intoned the prophetic Benedictus, the Cantic of Lauds. It is asserted by Mary of Agreda, whom of course we are not bound to believe, that just as it was at Mary's word that Elizabeth and John had been filled with the Holy Spirit when she arrived in Zachary's house, likewise, just before her departure, it was at her prayer that Zachary was delivered from his affliction and filled with the Holy Spirit.

It is believed that St Joseph came to Ain-Karim to take Mary home.