

Monday 4th Week of Advent

Gospel Luke 1:39-45

This painting, *"The Magnificat"* by Maurice Denis (1909) can help us to enter more deeply into the mystery of this extraordinary moment in today's Gospel. In this scene two women fondly greet one another against a background of a golden lake.

Traditionally, holy figures in Sacred Art have halos to show the uncreated light of Christ shining out of them but look here – no halo is needed as the whole background is ablaze with God's glory at this moment of encounter between Mary and her older cousin. This is an extraordinary moment indeed!

Mary holds within her Body Our Lord and Saviour, and has been called the Tabernacle of the Lord for

this reason. Just as a burning candle on the sanctuary indicates the presence of Jesus Christ in the Tabernacle in our church, so the tiny baby in Mary's womb is indicated by the tiny flame being held by the girl on the left. But this flame is not enough and the whole lake becomes a sea of gold reflecting the glory of the God who is present but hidden from view.

Elizabeth and her unborn child react to the Holy Presence, as does the woman on the right who, on her knees (as we are when the Blessed sacrament is exposed) holds up a key. One of the ancient "O" Antiphons for Vespers (Evening prayer of the Church) in the week before Christmas, is *"O Key of David and sceptre of Israel, what you open no one else can close again; what you close, no one can open. O come and lead the captive from prison; free those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death."* One of the ancient descriptions of Baptism is a "bath of enlightenment" (St. Justin, C150 AD) as Baptism frees us from the darkness of sin. Mary carries in her womb the Key of David; in whose light, all present are being bathed. Note the eye contact between Mary and Elizabeth, which is a sign of the spiritual contact between the babies in their respective wombs. Elizabeth's unborn child is baptised, enlightened, by the Holy Spirit at the sound of Mary's voice and leaps for joy.

Christmas is Christmas. Maybe the parties and gatherings we had been eagerly anticipating have been cancelled but the Lord will still come. He is in our churches in the tabernacles and comes into our hearts each time we welcome Him. May the Holy Spirit comfort us in any frustration we may be feeling regarding the whole covid situation and above all, may our spirits jump for joy as we celebrate the birth of Jesus Christ this week.

