

Feast of the Visitation

The feast of the Visitation recalls Mary's visit to her ageing cousin Elizabeth. Both had recently and unexpectedly been told that they would bear children who were central to God's plans for Israel. Mary took the demanding journey to the hill country of Judaea to share the good news with her cousin. It was always going to be a joyful meeting, one marked by the courtesy of both women.

Courtesy, a virtue with an old-fashioned ring, was the title of a poem by Hilaire Belloc, a notable English Catholic writer. In the verses of the poem he described the quality of courtesy evident in the feasts of Mary's Annunciation, Visitation and the Birth of Jesus. In the opening verse he praises courtesy:

Of Courtesy, it is much less
Than Courage of Heart or Holiness,
Yet in my Walks it seems to me
That the Grace of God is in Courtesy.

In a later verse he speaks of Mary's visit to Elizabeth as an expression of courtesy:

Our Lady out of Nazareth rode -
It was Her month of heavy load;
Yet was her face both great and kind,
For Courtesy was in Her Mind.

Courtesy is the perfect word to describe Luke's account of the Visitation. It is courtesy for a young woman in her own pregnancy to think of her older relative, and to take the trouble to make a hard journey into the hill country to visit her. It was also courteous of her to recognise Elizabeth's pregnancy as a gift to be celebrated and not merely as a passing event in her human life. She saw Elizabeth's pregnancy as part of God's plan for Israel and the world in which her son would have a significant part. The visit itself flowed into her deep gratitude to God for her own gift and into the mutual gratitude for sharing in one another's gifts – another mark of courtesy.

Mary's visit to Elizabeth concludes with a song of thanksgiving for the privilege that God had given her in asking her to be the mother of the Messiah. It also expressed a passionate hope for the world beyond her own. This hope, which reaches far beyond her own future and stretches to the transformed world in which the poor would be justly treated and God would rule, is also an expression of courtesy. Courtesy broadens and deepens our attention to the people and world around us.

As Belloc says in his introductory verse, courtesy is usually regarded as a domestic virtue. In Mary's Visitation, however, it is shown to be far reaching in its effects. Courtesy links us to other people in intimate ways. It blesses our close relationships, and contributes to looking on our intimate blessings with gratitude. Our concern for others and our gratitude to them, however spreads beyond our immediate world and makes us want to be part of God's plan for our universe.