

Prayer: Life-giving God, fill us with your grace so that we who hear the story of Jesus' coming, rejoice and tell the good news of your loving involvement through him for us and our world. Amen.

This is the last Sunday before we celebrate the day of Jesus birth and so we hear the story from his mother, Mary and we hear how she understood her place in God's working on earth. But - to add to our reflections we have a story from the great faith ancestor King David, and how he wanted to build the Lord a fixed home, to shift the dwelling place of YHWH from a tent to a building. And the third element given to us is the theme – the banner under which our reflections fit and today it is 'Great Reversals'. cV

It is a fact of faith – God delights in reversing our thinking and *occasionally* God does it in great and awesome ways. The reason **Jesus told us** that YHWH does this is because we are loved – we are the beloved of God; that God **loves us and our world** so much he sent his son – Jesus to be one of us. And because God loves **and Jesus loves** we are not allowed to do anything that might counter / block / stop God's love being poured into our world, and when we do – God says 'NO' and a reversal happens from our way to God's way - *again*.

Loving is a very *risky business* – you get hurt, rejected, killed – just ask Jesus about the costs involved! But we don't really have to ask do we???? **We know love** – the pain and the joy and how they combine in our lives to bring us alive – make us live; and **keep us relying** on God in Jesus because that, for us in the faith – that's what keeps us living as we were designed to. Because we are really, really good at *reversing* God's word, God's intention, and God's love and twisting it away from the Makers design / heart.

We are perfectly loved – we are not loved because we are perfect! And our down to earth example this morning is King David. All too often he is cast in a soft, glowing light – the romantic poet behind so many of the psalms, the harp player who calmed Saul... But like all of us there is more to him than that. What we heard today is the mature King. One who is at the height of his power, he has unified Israel – it is no *soft romantic* who can unify a disparate bunch of regional war-lords! He has served his time as a mercenary – we still don't have much respect for mercenaries do we? Don't we still see them as nothing more than – hired killers? David has also served his apprenticeship in the Kings court – Saul's, learning how to be an efficient political operator.... He learnt – well, whatever the lesson! Cv

So I invite you to ask – why would this 'person', politician, poet, skilled warrior, musician, king want to build a 'home' for YHWH? I invite you to go deeper – into what else this passage is communicating when YHWH say's a big "NO" to King David. This 'no' is more than about a building – it is a 'no' to the politics behind it and a 'no' to the theological manipulations that David is trying on. The first hint of the theological 'games' David is involved with is obvious in the conversation between him and the prophet Nathan. Initially Nathan agrees with the King to build YHWH a 'House'. **But** later that 'night' God tells Nathan it's a 'NO'. So Nathan has to go back to David with the great reversal of **their** plans!

Narrowing in on the message Nathan received that 'night' it is possible to see the shift that happens. **Instead of David** doing something 'good - nice' for God, God tells about all that He has done for David and Israel. The heart of the message is that it is '**God's story**' that *David* has a part in – and **not David's story** that includes **YHWH**.

What God tells David is that **God will give David a house**! The Hebrew is very clever the ^{*1} word *bayit* or 'house' can mean both a physical building and a household, i.e. dynasty. The last verse in today's reading, v. 16, states that the 'house' the Lord will build for David will be established forever before the Lord. Catch the reversal happening – YHWH will build David a 'House', a dynasty that will last forever!

I often wonder if our confusion and lack of understanding about the Lord in our lives; about God's ways in the world, about the things of faith *If a lot of that stuff* is because **we insist** on looking through **our** eyes, reading it our way and putting our interpretation. And like David and Nathan with their 'great idea'

we charge ahead without consulting YHWH and then suffer our own faith 'reversals'. When God **turns us around** and puts us back on His track. Sometimes – just sometimes the more traditional church wording is 'repent', we realise we have to repent and turn back to YHWH's ways. Repent means 'turn around' and in church it means we discover **we must** turn around, back to God and His ways

Because I believe a fundamental issue for us is that **it is God's story** that we are invited to have a part in – not **our story that we can include** God – Jesus -Spirit if we want to.... We all I think, struggle with allow God access to the steering wheel of our lives – we prefer to be in the driver's seat. But in Nathan's message for David YHWH tells how David is part of YHWH's plans – and not the other way around. So it is in our lives – **We belong in God's plan for this world** – and when we open our hearts and spirit and let go of the steering wheel – our lives get better and better – our lives are blessed.

Better, blessed, not perfect, not pain free, not instant maturity in faith and with wisdom, not free from the consequences of life's lessons... better because the Lord is our guide, our driver, our navigator... blessed because the challenges the Lord will give us will be the biggest we will ever have, the comfort will be the strongest, the love is overwhelming, all fear and tension can be survived.... I run out of words for why I believe holding on to and growing faith in God/ Jesus/ Spirit makes our lives better... it just does!

And it is our choice. Gabriel visited Mary and she had a choice, and because she caught the vision of what it would mean if she said yes – she had no choice. That's our YHWH – because we and our world are loved into infinity, Jesus was given for Mary to bring in to our world so that YHWH would remember in mercy to wrap us in an almighty hug and never let us go.

So Mary asked her questions of the angel Gabriel and then said 'YES'. She got up and went to visit her cousin Elizabeth. I had an *interesting discovery* when preparing for this morning.^{*2} It was about 112.65 km (~~70 miles~~) from Galilee to Judea, **more** than that if you take the longer route around Samaria as Mary undoubtedly did. The enmity between Jews and Samaritans ran deep, and not without reason on either side. Jews would typically take the long way around Samaria rather than set foot there.

The text seems to indicate that Mary walked this distance by herself. This would have been a dangerous journey, especially for an adolescent female traveling alone (remember Mary is expected to have been 12-15 years old). Mary is given honour with her independence in questioning Gabriel, and for her faith in accepting Gabriel's word. **That she walked** 160.93 km (~~100 miles~~) by herself to visit Elizabeth is yet another vivid example of both her faith and her independence.' A bit like David – Mary is stronger and more independent than we usually give her credit for!

When she arrived at Elizabeth's – she sang! Her song is very strong, and of course in keeping with our theme for today – it is full of ways that YHWH God acts in the lives of individuals, blesses them and invites them to join in often turning things around on them. She sings about God **reversing human expectations**, eg honour, or wealth vs poverty rankings to keep the ways of God alive in our world.

So her song has two parts – God and her and God and Israel. The vision she accepted that day was about her in God's plan so it could never be just about her – **it was always about God's plan that she had** a part in for God's people. She **also sings** of God holding on to Israel – His beloved people; of God's help being given and mercy, that–God remembers to be merciful!

^{*2}Mary had said the kind of mercy shown to her would be expanded into "generations and generations" (1:50), and indeed that is what she proclaims for Israel in 1:55. Israel is "remembered with mercy" which is extended to the generations of Abraham forever.

This is YHWH – God's way in the world. **This** how God triumphs. God triumphs not through violence. Violence is the way of the powers of this world, whom Luke will soon introduce (2:1-2, 3:1-2). Violence is their customary pattern. God, however, triumphs through **compassion and love, through invitation and acceptance**; through individuals prepared to grab hold of a vision of a **different way of being** that although blessed is all too often a reversal of the ways of the world. Amen