

Is anyone here old enough to remember when the movie “Indiana Jones: The Raiders of the Lost Ark” was first released. The year was 1981. I’d heard that it was good and invited my friend Leigh to come with me. She was not sure that she would enjoy it, but because she’s my friend, she came along.

As the opening credits roll, we see a drop-dead gorgeous Indiana Jones stride up a mountain somewhere in South America. We learn that it is 1936. Behind him come a retinue of Hispanic porters. The movie is fast paced. Our hero is gradually deserted by all his porters except one. The presence of indigenous people is foreshadowed by a poison dart in a tree.

Leigh and I were on the edge of our seats. How could he get out of this alive! The pace of the action kept our nerves on edge.

Eventually Indiana finds a tunnel which is where his former competitor, Forrestal, had died. His companion is terrified and says that no-one gets out of there alive. But he follows our hero into the subterranean passage. There they face spiders and deftly avoid a series of booby traps.

Leigh and I hardly dared breathe! There was one life-threatening event after another. We were terrified.

Indiana is betrayed by his companion who comes to a sticky end. But then a massive round boulder comes careering down the tunnel. He runs like the wind and finally launches himself from the entrance to the tunnel into the jungle below. Safe at last. Except that his enemy, Belloq, is there with an army of indigenous people armed with poison darts and bows and arrows.

He has to surrender the golden idol, but he leaps away down to the river to the seaplane and rescue. Indiana rides off into the sunset in the seaplane minus the golden idol, but still wearing his hat.

We relaxed and settled back into our seats. Leigh nudged me and said “All of that to introduce one character.”

It was a long introduction to Dr Indiana Jones, university professor, archaeologist and adventurer. We learned that he was not just gorgeous, but also smart and resourceful. His single-minded quest for ancient artefacts puts him in a collision course with the unscrupulous, with improbable Nazis and with violent criminals who will stop at nothing to get their hands on age-old relics. Fortunately, his adversaries are none too bright and terrible shots. The movie is full of tension and release as Indiana goes from one death defying encounter to the next. The audience learns to expect the unexpected in this fast-paced romp.

The infancy narratives of Luke’s gospel fulfill a similar role. Luke devotes a full two chapters to introducing Jesus. Of the four gospel writers, it is only Luke who gives us these stories. They consist of two annunciations, one to Zechariah, the father of John the Baptist and the better-known annunciation to Mary. There are two birth stories. There are two stories of Jesus in the temple, one when he is six weeks old and another at twelve years. There are three canticles, or song-prayers, that in some religious communities are said each day. The Benedictus, Zechariah’s song is prayed every morning. The Magnificat, Mary’s song which forms part of our reading tonight is prayed in the evening and the Nunc Dimittis, Simeon’s song is prayed at night.

The infancy narratives introduce us to the major themes of the gospel – God’s care for the poor and radical continuity with God’s mighty acts of the past and at the same time, radical discontinuity that comes with the births of John and Jesus. We discover the importance of the temple. The gospel begins and ends in the temple. Jesus makes two visits during these narratives. We are also alerted to the importance of the work of the Holy Spirit who overshadows Mary, who prompts Elizabeth to recognise the divinity of the unborn Christ child, who prompts Zechariah to praise God and to prophesy and to promise Simeon that he would not die before he saw the Lord’s Messiah.

You could make a beautiful and moving film about the infancy narratives. If we focused just on chapter 1 of Luke, we have a clever literary device of juxtaposition. We have the story of Zechariah and Elizabeth set alongside the story of Mary. There are two stories, but the bridge between the two, the story that connects them, is the powerful story of the Visitation.

Some years ago I was challenged to reflect on the one biblical story I would choose if we lost the entire Bible. My choice is the Visitation. Jeff told me that Catholics celebrate the Visitation on the 31<sup>st</sup> of May, so every year we have a dinner party on that date. We invite people who have not been to our house before. We read the story, sing the hymn “Tell out my soul” and we pray the collect from Janet Morley:

O God our deliverer,  
 you cast down the mighty,  
 and lift up those of no account:  
 as Elizabeth and Mary embraced

with songs of liberation,  
so may we also be pregnant with your Spirit,  
and affirm one another in hope for the world,  
through Jesus Christ. Amen

There are so many things I could share with you today about the Visitation. God has brought down the powerful from their thrones. In 4BCE, about the time of Jesus' birth, there was a Jewish uprising in Galilee that was ruthlessly quelled by the Romans. Men were murdered, women raped and children enslaved. The major event in Jesus' village's life was the day the Romans came. Caesar was Lord, the Son of God. But in the midst of hardship and deprivation was the unshakeable faith in the God of Israel who was more powerful than Caesar. This was not just a doctrinal belief, but sedition.

I could talk about how God lifted up the lowly; God has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty. Again, this is a powerful introduction to the person of Jesus. He fed the multitudes on the hillside, taking the bread, blessing and breaking it and giving it to all – to the worthy and the unworthy, the believers and the sceptics, the old and the young, the good, the bad and the ugly.

I could talk about the God of justice whose mercy is for those who fear him. This foreshadows Jesus in the synagogue of Nazareth. "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour."

So many themes I could draw out of this story, but I'm going to talk about something easily missed – hospitality. I wonder how Elizabeth felt when she realised that she was pregnant. I know the pain and the grief of infertility in my own family. I know the great emotional and financial lengths that people are prepared to go to in order to have a child. As a young woman from a priestly family, she married well. She would be expected to produce children, especially sons. Apart from the natural desire for a child, a son was the ancient world's superannuation and social security.

I wonder if Zechariah's family regarded her as a dud and urged him to divorce her so he could try again with another wife. I wonder if she lived with that anxiety that was allayed by Zechariah's love and faithfulness. I wonder how she felt when tongues started wagging about her barrenness. Her response to her miraculous pregnancy was "This is what the Lord has done for me when he looked favourably on me and took away the disgrace I have endured among my people." But I also wonder if her joy and gratitude was tinged with a certain level of fear in a world where modern obstetric care was not available and many women died in childbirth.

I wonder how Mary felt. I wonder if she feared disgrace for her pregnancy. Worst case scenario is that she might have been stoned for her apparent immorality. I wonder if she was anxious to find a place where she could tell her story and be believed, a place of welcome and acceptance.

I understand that it was a journey of 80 miles or 128 kilometres that Mary undertook. That is a journey of several days, even for a young, fit woman.

And here was Mary. I imagine her as excited but at the same time trying to make sense of what had happened to her. I imagine her as fearful of the possible consequences. Would Joseph stand by her? Would she be ostracised in her community? Might she even be stoned to death? What would Elizabeth's reaction be? I imagine her as enduring wave after wave of nausea, desperately trying to find a bush to puke in.

And the reception that Mary received was not just acceptance, but reverence and awe. In a prayer that many people say daily, Elizabeth said, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb." Elizabeth, her belly swollen with a child who was doing soccer practice when she was trying to rest, pressure on her bladder necessitating frequent trips to the loo, uncomfortable enlarged breasts preparing to breast feed her baby, enfolds her young cousin in her arms. In that meeting is an encounter with the divine. It is hospitality embodied.

Then Mary, the recipient of this overwhelming and loving hospitality breaks forth in praise of God. "My soul magnifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour." The values of this world are turned upside down. Elizabeth's hospitality transforms Mary from being worried and anxious to being a powerful prophet of God's justice and care for the poor and downtrodden.

Deitrich Bonhoeffer called the Magnificat "the most passionate, the wildest, one might even say the most revolutionary hymn ever sung." Oscar Romero drew a comparison between Mary and the poor and powerless in his own country.

There is a significant biblical scholar by the name of Brendan Byrne whose commentary on Luke's gospel is called "The Hospitality of God." He says that his goal is to bring home to people a sense of the extravagance of God's love for them. This story of the visitation is not an incidental, sweet "women's" story. Mary is not silent and submissive. She is a dangerous revolutionary.

It is a powerful introduction to the gospel of God's preferential option for the poor, of God's justice and mercy and most of all of God's lavish and overwhelming love for us. It is an introduction to God's hospitality as we see it in the life of Jesus of Nazareth.

Jesus' radical hospitality was exercised throughout his earthly life. He welcomed women, he taught the ignorant and he healed the sick. At the Last Supper he even fed Judas. As he opened his arms on the cross, he even welcomed a thief. Jesus exemplified God's hospitality from before he was born until his death.

And this hospitality is exercised by God's people even today. Let me give you a couple of examples. A resident of San Francisco, Sara Miles was brought up by militantly atheist parents. She had no religious background. She was a journalist who'd worked in South America where she'd seen poverty, injustice and corruption.

One day, attracted by the beautiful architecture, she walked into St Gregory of Nyssa Episcopal church. She was made very welcome but found the service somewhat ridiculous. In her book, *Take this Bread*, she writes:

We sat down and stood up, sang and sat down, waited and listened and stood up and sang, and it was all pretty peaceful and sort of interesting. “Jesus invites everyone to his table,” a woman announced, and we started moving up. The table had some dishes on it, and a pottery goblet.

And then we gathered around that table.

And there was more singing and standing, and someone was putting a piece of fresh, crumbly bread in my hands, saying “the body of Christ,” and handing me the goblet of sweet wine, saying “the blood of Christ,” and then something outrageous and terrifying happened. Jesus happened to me.

The community of St Gregory of Nyssa offered hospitality to a young woman whose life was transformed. But the life of the community of St Gregory of Nyssa was also transformed. Sara Miles was a gifted young woman. Her new-found faith led her to express it in responding to the needs of the poor and homeless in San Francisco – and there are a lot of them. She started a free food pantry that is still going some 20 years later.

St Gregory of Nyssa was always a place of hospitality which it exercised through liturgy, art and music. People who would not fit in a suburban church were drawn there, especially those in the LGBTQI+ community. Now it extended its arms outwards in hospitality to immigrants, the penniless and the displaced. This is a parish that lives out the hospitality of God as shown in the life and death of Jesus of Nazareth.

Another example. Stephen K Amos is a successful comedian. Recently he took part in a pilgrimage to Rome with other well-known people. They are Christian, Jewish, Muslim and atheist. You can catch the doco on iview.



It's worth watching. After many days of walking, the pilgrims arrive in Rome. They are overwhelmed with the grandeur of Rome and especially St Peter's basilica.

Stephen K Amos is not a believer in anything much, but as he comes closer and closer to the eternal city, he becomes increasingly anxious about whether the church has a place for a gay man. Will he be welcomed or will he be rejected?

The pilgrims receive news that they have been granted an audience with Pope Francis. Stephen asks about the goodness of God who took his mother and his twin sister, both of whom were deeply religious. He also tells the Pope that he is worried that as a gay man he does not be welcome in the church. The Pope tells him not to put the emphasis on the adjective but rather on the noun. We are all human beings and have dignity. There are some who select or discard people based on that adjective. These people do not have a human heart.

Another of the other pilgrims, the Jewish participant, wipes the tears from Stephen's face. Afterwards Stephen says that the Pope's openness and honesty blew his mind. In tears again, he said that this is what he had been searching for for so long. I'm sure that Pope Francis heard about this. I wonder what impact it had on him.

My friend Leigh said that she marvelled that the introduction to the Raiders of the Lost Ark could put all of her nightmares into twelve minutes of film.

I marvel that the introduction to Luke's gospel, the infancy narratives and especially the story of the Visitation can contain so much that nurtures our faith, tell us about the person and work of Christ and gives us hope for the future.

I wonder how the story of the Visitation, this story of radical and transforming hospitality, might work in our hearts tonight.

I wonder how we might enter again the dynamic encounter of which Luke wrote. I wonder how it might touch us in a new and deeper way tonight. I wonder what people on the fringes of our society are looking for. I wonder how we might reach out to them with Christ's hospitality. I wonder how that might transform us too. I wonder how the hospitality we receive from Christ might be affirming of our own gifts and graces and how we might extend that affirmation to others.

I'll close by repeating Janet Morley's collect for the feast of the Visitation.

O God our deliverer,  
you cast down the mighty,  
and lift up those of no account:  
as Elizabeth and Mary embraced  
with songs of liberation,  
so may we also be pregnant with your Spirit,  
and affirm one another in hope for the world,  
through Jesus Christ. Amen