**The Rt Revd Dr Flora Winfield, Bishop of Selby, reflects on Luke 1.39-55 for the Fourth Sunday of Advent, 22nd December.**

Hello. This Sunday, the fourth Sunday of Advent, gives us, for the gospel reading, one of the most engaging and loveliest moments in the whole of the gospels. As Mary, who has just heard the news from the Angel Gabriel that she is to be the bearer of God's son, had just heard his call and given her assent, Mary takes herself off to the hill country to visit Elizabeth, her cousin, who has also recently found that she is going to bear a child. Immediately before this story in the Gospel of Luke, in the first chapter, is the account we call the Annunciation, where Mary hears the message of the Angel Gabriel.

And immediately before that is the Annunciation to Zechariah, Elizabeth's husband, where the same angel gives good news to Zechariah while he's on duty in the temple, that his wife will bear a child, a son, and we know that he grows up to be John the Baptist. So here are these two women, one of them, Mary, probably rather young, and the other, Elizabeth, as the gospel account tells us, old and full of years, who find themselves unexpectedly about to bear a child. And, greeting one another, there's this tremendous moment of friendship and solidarity. As the great story of salvation, which works itself out through scripture, comes to a moment, a wonderful moment of communion between these two women. As the great story of the cosmic story, which starts with creation and starts with the word, becomes the word made flesh, and they greet one another in solidarity and in friendship.

This great story, lived out through the history of the children of Israel, and now, in the days of our own lives and our own experience, is here expressed in two women who find - in a moment - the opportunity to give one another a hug, and to know the kindness and friendship that holds them together in their common new experience of being pregnant and being pregnant in the most extraordinary circumstances.

The visitation is a wonderful story of human engagement with the divine, for Mary comes into Elizabeth's house and as Elizabeth hears Mary's greeting, we read in Luke's Gospel that the child leapt in her womb, and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit and exclaimed with a loud cry, “Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb!” And Mary responds to Elizabeth's greeting with that great hymn of exaltation and praise, which we call the Magnificat, “My soul magnifies the Lord,” the song of those who are thought of as lowly and left behind and excluded and disregarded, being placed at the top of God's list. For the first shall be last, and the last shall be first.

Mary's response to Elizabeth's greeting is to praise the Lord. So, in these days of Advent, let our response to God's call to us be to offer that praise of heart and mind and life, which we see so exemplified in Mary as she lives out her unique call to be the bearer of our Lord, to be the one who brings him to birth in the world. Each of us is called to see in her a pattern for our discipleship, as we are also called to be God-bearers, bringers of Christ to those around us, bringers of the light that comes in the darkness, the light that no darkness can overcome. Amen.