

Prophets are all well and good – and we've heard from some of them this Advent. Some confident, some clamouring, some chastising, some yearning...but all of them men.

There's nothing wrong with that in and of itself – it is a reflection of the cultures that combined to shape and create what we call Scripture – but we would do well to remember that the most significant events in the Christian calendar are first experienced by women.

Women stay till the bitter end at the foot of Jesus' cross. Women arrive first to find the tomb empty. Women have the first encounter with the risen Jesus. May it's worth listening to the women at Christmas too.

Yes, we'll hear the angel's song, and the shepherd's proclamation – but listen to the women who are most directly affected. Listen to women who are literally swelled by expectation and uncertainty (for that is what pregnancy does) Listen to these life-bearers as they consider how their children might influence the world; a world laden with care, and burdened by pain and oppression; by injustice and tyranny.

Listen to them.

Elizabeth is one who knows. And for all her youth, Mary knows too.

We didn't get to hear Mary's reaction to the news earlier in Luke's gospel. We sing about it instead. An angelic visitation that confirms what Mary surely knew – that she was carrying a child. But this child will be special, says the vision to the visionary. And Mary, the visionary, says 'let it be according to your word.'

This should tell us that Mary is worth listening to – this young woman whose condition puts her under suspicion (married or not), whose gender renders her voiceless – will not stay silent, even in the presence of a divine messenger. Her reunion with Elizabeth is a meeting of two powerful persons; each carrying life within them – each bold about how that life will change the lives of others. Elizabeth talks of endurance and perseverance, and Mary has the nerve to imagine that she and God are partners in liberation.

It is worth wondering what the Gospels would sound like if women had written them – or at least, been more widely represented. But it is stunning that the author of Luke's gospel gives these two women such a platform. Two pregnant women – one well advanced in her years, the other whose life is just beginning – are drawn together by their shared condition, and instead of 'girl talk,' they speak of what must have sounded like revolution.

Both have had heavenly encounters. Both will see lives changed because of their children. And they imagine more! Mary is given a song to sing that should put the fear of God into anyone who imagines they are powerful. Elizabeth honours Mary as the 'mother of my Lord.' This is treasonous talk – and how often are we willing to listen to women's voices when they cry for change?

Maybe that's why Luke gave these thoughts to women...it's easier – even now (unfortunately) for powerful people to dismiss this kind of thing. 'Hormones,' we say, as if the powerful, world-altering act of giving birth was no threat. But these women speak out of a determination and love that is hard to quantify.

Mary will show that love from the beginning of the gospel to the very end. She is the first to celebrate Jesus' birth, and she offers her tears at his death, and all

along the journey, she is there; witnessing, worrying, wondering with the rest of the disciples what will happen next...and waiting.

Waiting for the signs that the power structure is coming undone. Waiting for the triumph of the oppressed – for the justice that has been promised – for the liberating movement of love and grace that she has always known was just around the corner.

We should listen to the women in this story. They know things we don't – they trust in God with an alarming abandon that makes them powerful and beautiful. They are the first evangelists and the first of the 'lowly' to recognize that God's promised deliverance is a gift of and for life – the here and now. And while today, they seem to talk only of possibilities, tomorrow we will discover that the new life they welcome into the world will bring new life to all. The visionary gives birth to a teacher of truth. And that truth – that grace – that love he brings still threatens the powerful and empowers those who are at the mercy of the merciless. And the women know this.

This Christmas story is the story of Jesus birth, but it is told by the women first – whose voices seemed insignificant, and so gained power.

We dismiss the voices of the outcast – of women – the poor – the 'other' – at our peril, for God has an affinity for those who aren't being heard. Wild-eyed prophets, an women thought to be barren (thus past her usefulness) or a young, single mother; these are the people God partners with – these are the agents of heaven-sent change. Maybe we should listen more closely to their echoes in our own time.