One way and another, the past few weeks have been a bit of a blurr! First there was the emotional roller-coaster that is Lent, Holy Week & Easter, then the sadness of saying farewell to my church family in Gloucestershire, and the joy of so many wonderful welcomes here in Coventry. Since Tuesday I've been trying to learn my way round this great Cathedral...so perhaps it's not surprising that I'm a wee bit confused about where I am and which way is “up” – but I have to say the Liturgical calendar really doesn't help!

On Thursday we were celebrating Our Lord’s Ascension – the last chapter of the story of Jesus of Nazareth here on earth...Next weekend we will rejoice in the coming of the Holy Spirit and the birth of the Church...but today? Today we’re back at the beginning of the story as the pregnant Mary goes to see her cousin Elizabeth. Honestly...Where, oh where, is The Doctor when you need him?

But however difficult it may be to keep track of our whereabouts in the year, today is most definitely the feast of the Visitation...a celebration of a particular visit that has something particular to say to all of us whether we come as visitors or extend a welcome to new friends today. My Cainscross family might warn you that one of my favourite ways to engage with Scripture is to ask, with Ignatius Loyola, “Where are you in this story?” - and that is my question today.

Where are you, in this story of a remarkable visit...

Let’s begin, not with the perspective of Mary but that of Elizabeth –whose greeting provides the most wonderful welcome that her cousin could imagine.

“Blessed are you among women and blessed is the fruit of your womb!”

Before Mary has even opened her mouth to share her incredible news, Elizabeth, alert to the unexpected, recognises that God is at work. What a reassurance for Mary – who must surely have been wondering in the weeks since the angel’s visit whether she’d dreamed the whole thing.

While I’m really not comparing myself with the Blessed Virgin, we might have a little in common. Are you familiar with imposter syndrome? It's an officially recognised phenomenon, whose sufferers, despite achieving something significant, find it impossible to believe in it. They are constantly expecting to be told “There's been a mistake”....and to find themselves sent back without more ado to the obscurity they feel they deserve.

Well, for a while now I’ve expected to awaken from the dream in which I was invited to come here. I’ve expected another phonecall, telling me to stay at home...But here we are today, and each of you who has welcomed me here has affirmed my right to be here, recognising that maybe God is doing as God so often does – using someone unlikely to join in with God’s plans for this place at this time. Perhaps, just perhaps, Mary felt a bit like that too. It's hard enough even in an ordinary pregnancy, to grasp at first that a new life is really growing inside you, to imagine the changes that are to come...and Mary’s pregnancy is anything but ordinary! So, did she sometimes wonder if she was quite mad? Did her ponderings lead her to question the visit of the angel, and his incredible promise?

If so, Elizabeth's words of greeting must have had a tremendous impact...the first confirmation that Gabriel's message might bear fruit in the life of this teenager from a small town in Galilee.

“Blessed are you...”

So- perhaps today you stand with Elizabeth....able to recognise God at work in others, and to name this so that all the world can see and celebrate too.

Like her son John the Baptist, Elizabeth acts as a sign-post, directing others to Jesus, even as a baby in his mother's womb.

And Mary? What of her, the handmaid of the Lord?
She is already the God-bearer, carrying within her that precious spark of life whose coming into our world changes everything for all time and beyond. She has earned an unchallenged place in Salvation history, her obedience to God's call enabling her to cooperate with God in a way that no-one else has ever done...but she is still in some ways an ordinary girl, seeking reassurance from one older and wiser, a woman whom she can trust this greatest secret. Mary needs Elizabeth's greeting before she can fully claim and celebrate what is already happening within her and for her.

Even the Mother of God needs the reassurance and support of fellow pilgrims...and inspired by the reassurance she receives, she flowers into that hymn of praise that we call the Magnificat. “My soul magnifies the Lord” she proclaims, or, as we've already sung “Tell out, my soul...!”

There's a good deal of singing in our readings today. According to Zephaniah, God looks at his people and sings for joy – a concept that I find both incredible and life-changing. God looks at you and me – and SINGS! Isn't that wonderful?

So too Mary's joy cannot be contained but bursts forth in singing, as she rewrites the words of Hannah, the unexpected mother of Samuel, and turns them into a prophecy of the way of the Kingdom. For, make no mistake, this Magnificat is a song of revolution....

We often hear it softened, subdued by the beauty of so many settings at Evensong, its edge dulled by familiarity but look again at the words.

“He has put down the mighty from their seat and has exalted the humble and meek. He has filled the hungry with good things and sent the rich empty away”

Not for nothing does another transcription present it as a “song of high revolt” which is sung to the tune O Tannebaum – familiar all over the world as “We'll keep the red flag flying”. Though Mary’s song looks back with gratitude at God's power at work in her life “The almighty has done great things for me, and holy is his name”, this is not simply a celebration of the way things are but an invitation to look ahead into God's future.

As we sing we are plunged headlong into the upside down world of God's kingdom – the world that Mary's Son lives and proclaims by word and action, the world where the meek shall inherit the earth.

So– where are you in the story?
Where are you as an individual?
And where are we as we gather as God's church?
It seems to me that we must, in turn, be both Mary and Elizabeth.
We must be God bearers, sharing God's reconciling love with world that sorely needs it.
We must be sign-posts, pointing the way to Jesus and celebrating the evidence of God's Kingdom among us
We must recognise and affirm God's work in others and celebrate it in our own lives.

Like Mary and Elizabeth, we must allow God's Spirit free reign, enabling us to make Magnificat together – so that we too can become collaborators in that Kingdom work of turning the world upside down.