

# expectant hope

*At that time Mary got ready and hurried to a town in the hill country of Judea, where she entered Zechariah's home and greeted Elizabeth. When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the baby leaped in her womb, and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. In a loud voice she exclaimed: 'Blessed are you among women and blessed is the child you will bear!'*

Luke 1:39-42

One of my favourite games when my wife and I have been expecting a child has been 'chase the bump' – hunting for the baby's head or bottom and seeing if they moved when we touched it – chasing the bump around their mother's tummy. Often the game would stop when the baby had had enough and decided to dance on my wife's bladder or start to kick out in other directions in protest. I think that I enjoyed the game rather more than my wife and children did!

Fetal sentience is a buzzword in some circles, referencing the debate about whether babies in the womb are able to feel pain or are aware of their environment. From many conversations over the years I have realised that anyone who has carried a child would attest that they most certainly are. I vividly remember being at the Notting Hill Carnival when we were expecting my daughter, and after a particularly loud float passed by, playing a driving bass line, my wife suggesting that we move away as the baby's movements showed she was clearly not enjoying the volume!

Yet the gospel story shows something even more remarkable. One child recognising another. But not the recognition of any other child (that would be remarkable enough). No, Elizabeth's unborn son danced for joy because he recognised the presence of his creator and saviour in Mary's womb.

The psalmist reminds us that *'through the praise of children and infants you have established a stronghold against your enemies, to silence the foe and the avenger'* (Psalm 8:2). From the unborn John the Baptist, God welcomed praise. From the unborn he accepts witness. Through two mothers The Lord spoke prophetically of the salvation that he was bringing.<sup>1</sup> Age, gender and social status are not the important factors here.

Whatever our society says, God values children and he values mothers. He values both so much that he has spoken through them as loudly and clearly as has he has through (mostly male) prophets and kings. It should make us stop and remember that when we are charged with the care of women and their babies, we undertake a holy task.

1. Luke 1:42-55