

# *St Mary's Cathedral, Glasgow*

open, inclusive, welcoming

**For the Feast of the Visitation  
St Mary's Cathedral, Glasgow  
1<sup>st</sup> June 2020**

**Dr. Deborah Lewer on Jacopo Pontormo's *The Visitation*,  
c. 1528-1530, San Michele e San Francesco, Carmignano**

1

Welcome to this podcast from St Mary's Cathedral in Glasgow. My name is Debbie Lewer. I am an art historian at the University of Glasgow, and a member of the congregation at St Mary's. We celebrate the Feast of the Visitation today. It's a perfect time to take a look at one of the most remarkable works of art there is on the subject of this joyful meeting between Mary and her cousin Elizabeth.

Mary, the virgin, is in blue. She is young and graceful, and has travelled to the arms of her relative. Elizabeth is older, known and named in the story, as barren. Her dumbstruck husband can't believe her pregnancy. Life growing in *these* two wombs, is miraculous. It's shocking, it's a scandal, even. One that causes an eruption of rejoicing.

The painter, Jacopo Pontormo, works to tell us more than we can see. Because there's another meeting happening here: the first between Jesus and John – the Baptist, yet unborn. It's all in the dance of bodies, of light feet, swirling soft folds, and blessing.

2

There are four women here. The panel is large - they are painted life size. But the artist breaks with the conventions of perspective, and makes them appear monumental, far larger than life. The women meet eye-to-eye, outside, in civic space, in a city rather like 16<sup>th</sup>-century Florence. This visitation is far less domestic than some versions of the scene.

Who are the other two women, looking out at us? Their expressions are enigmatic. Perhaps there is a trace of sorrow, a longer view of what will unfold. They are like a visual echo of the young Mary, and the older Elizabeth. Logically, they are handmaidens, servants, companions to these holy women. But painting them as he does, Pontormo also makes them witnesses, who invite and meet *our* gaze. Through them, *we* too are drawn into this intimate circle of recognition and of knowing that what is to come will change everything.

3

Painting the Visitation is a challenge. At its simplest, the story makes for a sweet, homely scene. It's a fond reunion between generations, of the kind that are precious, even more so, in our own time. But this meeting is also a revelation, a prophecy. It calls on us to imagine a new future, an unborn man, and another leaping at the one whose way he will prepare. Elizabeth's own reverence comes with a kick, and as Mary enters the embrace, her prayer is one of the most compelling of all scripture and of any woman: praise and a cry for justice for the downtrodden.

Pontormo's language for all this, is colour, leaping forms, animate folds, in vivid contrast to the grey, uniform architecture of the city. The encounter is magnified beyond ordinary space and ordinary time.

4

Pontormo's *Visitation* is full of mystery. We don't know for certain who commissioned it or where it first hung. It may have been intended for a Florentine setting – for the city whose patron saint is John the Baptist. In a curious little detail, two tiny male figures lurk, almost unseen, by a distant doorway. No-one knows for sure who *they* might be, of which time they are. But as we look at this larger, impassioned meeting, perhaps *we* can join in with the celebration, with the call for justice, and with the knowledge that new life is more vibrant, more radical and more important than any hard edifices we can build.