

Advent 4C - 24 December 2006 - Luke 1:39-55

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What would make you celebrate wildly? Remember the children last week during the pageant? Remember how happy and uninhibited they were. Various people commented to me that it was wonderful to see them so relaxed and comfortable about performing in church. They were celebrating being part of a community, celebrating the season of Christmas with its holidays and presents and family times. We sang songs together, not songs we made up but songs written by others. Equally we could have sung something we felt from our hearts in celebration of the joy we were experiencing.

In this passage from Luke today we hear Mary break into song in celebration of God's promise to the world and her part in it.

Mary lived in a culture where rhythm and beat mattered and so she sang a song which we could clap hands to or stamp out the beat with our feet.

The song is called the "Magnificat" because that is its first word in Latin. It's one of the most famous songs in Christianity. "It's been whispered in monasteries, chanted in cathedrals, recited in small remote churches by evening candlelight, and set to music with trumpets and kettledrums by Johann Sebastian Bach." (Wright, T. (2001). *Luke for Everyone*. London: SPCK. p.14).

It's radical and subversive both in itself and because it is contained in a meeting between two women – an older woman who has been infertile and therefore one of the least valued of women, and Mary, a younger woman of 15 or 16 who is unmarried and pregnant. Two virtual social outcasts. Two of the most frowned upon and least powerful in the society of the time – a patriarchal society which measured women's worth by their relationships to men and the number of sons they bore.

It is radical because "the Magnificat is the longest passage put on the lips of any female speaker in the New Testament ... this is the most any woman gets to say." (Johnson, E. (2006). *Dangerous Memories: A mosaic of Mary in Scripture*. New York and London: Continuum. p106).

It is radical because Mary praises God for the promise to change things for the poor and downtrodden. Mary herself is one of the poor God promises to lift up. Let's not romanticise her situation. It was a harsh reality that her life would have been one of mere subsistence. Let's briefly have a look at the kind of life Mary would have lived just so we have a clearer picture of how life may have been for her.

Mary lived her adult life in Nazareth, a small village off the main road of commercial travel. Archaeologists are able to tell us that there were 300 to 400 inhabitants who were peasant farmers working their own land, tenant farmers working land belonging to others, or craftspeople who made tools, built buildings etc. There is no archaeological evidence of any wealth in Nazareth – there were no public roads, or civic buildings, inscriptions, mosaics or frescoes, no luxury items such as perfume bottles or even simple glass. The houses were small with packed earth floors, thatched roofs and stone and mud walls. The houses tended to be in clusters of three – usually family groups living together. They shared cooking facilities in an outside, open courtyard. The Galileans of the time lived at subsistence level. This was Mary's life – and Joseph's and Jesus'.

Nazareth was in the province of Galilee, which was occupied by the Romans. There was a huge imbalance in wealth, with the 90% majority of the people working the land to provide goods for the 10% wealthy governing minority. There was no middle class. The Galilean villagers were triple taxed – there was the temple tithe to support the priests in Jerusalem, a tribute to the Roman emperor, and more again to the local Jewish client king through whom Rome ruled by proxy – in Mary's lifetime a string of Herods. It was a bare existence. People were hit hard by the multiple taxes and many lost their lands and became utterly impoverished. There were uprisings against the Roman occupation and these were brutally quashed. There was brutality and violence such as we hear of today in East Timor, Dafur, Afghanistan, Iraq – to name a few.

Mary, who would have been known as Miriam, lived in this context. She and her family occupied the lower rung of the social and economic ladder, and her life was lived out in an economically poor, politically oppressed, Jewish peasant culture marked by exploitation and publicly violent events.

It was from this context that she set out on her journey from Nazareth to the hill country of Judea, some 120 – 150 km away to see her older, hitherto, infertile cousin, Elisabeth.

We have to ask why, on the eve of Christ's birth, we are given the story of Mary and Elisabeth to ponder. We have been returned to the days after the conception, after the annunciation. What does it mean for us? We encounter Elisabeth and her unborn son, John the Baptist. Having resigned herself to the shame of being childless, Elisabeth now has to deal with her unexpected blessing. When Zechariah, her priest-husband in disbelief took on the angel messenger, to his cost, Elisabeth by contrast said "so has the Lord done for me." Mary faces a different kind of shame. Both women have to work out how to handle their blessings. How to speak to family, to their men, face their communities?

The Magnificat is modelled on the canticle of Hannah in the book of Samuel which also expresses solidarity with those who suffer, who have no standing in their world. It praises God's actions on behalf of marginal and exploited people ... it praises God's continuing actions throughout history to redeem the lowly, including Mary and all marginal and exploited people. Rooted in Jewish tradition, Mary stands as the singer of the song of justice of the coming messianic age.

Mary takes the role of a prophet.

So this song, grounded in the tradition of her people, is the song of a poor woman, sung in the context of a meeting with another woman who is also one of the least valued in the society at the time. It is set in a woman's setting – a domestic space, the home of Elizabeth and Zechariah but Zechariah has been silenced. He has been struck dumb and there are no other men around. Such silencing of men's voices in biblical stories is highly unusual and this silent space is filled with the voices of two women. This is an extremely rare biblical scene of a conversation between two women.

This is the story of two women blessing each other and working out how to move forward in their lives. By connecting with each other, Mary and Elizabeth are empowered to speak with prophetic voices. They meet, and the force of their meeting leads them to proclaim in the midst of their history that God blesses the lowly and gives hope that oppressive institutions will be overthrown.

A pregnant woman is not the usual image that comes to mind when one thinks of a prophet, yet here are two such spirit filled pregnant prophets crying out in joy, warning, and hope for the future.

This is a very different picture we have been handed down over the centuries of a passive humble Mary who passively plays out her role in God's plan. How exciting!

Mary, in the tradition of the prophets, speaks of the approach of the reign of God disturbing the order of the world run by the arrogant, the hard of heart, the oppressor. She speaks of three revolutions of God – the moral in scattering the proud; the social in casting down the mighty and exalting the humble; and the economic in filling the hungry. These revolutions have provoked the comment that, alongside the beauty of Mary, there is dynamite!

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the German theologian killed by the Nazis, preached that “The song of Mary is the oldest Advent hymn. It is at once the most passionate, the wildest, one might even say the most revolutionary Advent hymn ever sung. This is not the gentle, tender, dreamy Mary whom we sometimes see in paintings; this is the passionate, surrendered, proud, enthusiastic Mary who speaks out here. This song has none of the sweet, nostalgic, or even playful tones of some our Christmas carols. It is instead a hard, strong, inexorable song about collapsing thrones and humbled lords of this world, about the power of God” (Johnson, p113).

Indeed the Magnificat’s message is considered so subversive that for a period during the 1980s the government of Guatemala banned its public recitation, and it was banned from national radio by the military junta of Argentina in 1981. The shocking, revolutionary message of this song of Mary does not appeal to the comfortable. What does this mean in light of the fact that we are told that God loves everyone? Indeed, God does love everyone but the language of this song of Mary makes clear that God’s love is particularly on the side of the downtrodden. “God protects the poor, noticing their tears, while challenging the comfortable and the proud to conversion, to genuine discipleship, even at the loss of their own comfort …” (Johnson, pp.115,116).

Luther wrote of the Magnificat that Mary sang it not for herself alone, but for all of us to sing after her.

At this time of year we are reminded of how small and helpless God was when born into our world. We are reminded that this festival of God’s birth is about remembering God’s vision for the world and remembering the people with whom God identified in becoming human. It’s about recognising Mary’s message in her song, a message about ending oppression, helping the poor and including the outcasts into our communities. Will we join in Mary’s song, capturing the meaning and essence of this holy season?

Sources

Johnson, Elizabeth. *Dangerous Memories: A mosaic of Mary in Scripture*. New York and London: Continuum.

Wright, Tom. (2001). *Luke for Everyone*. London: SPCK.

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