

The Fourth Sunday of Advent - "The Song of Mary"

Gospel Reading: Luke 1:39-55

On this fourth Sunday of Advent, we honour a person who will be at the heart of our Christmas celebration. Above all else, of course, we celebrate the birth of Jesus – but crucially the birth of our Saviour was, in God's wisdom, through the agency of a young unmarried woman called Mary.

The honouring of the Blessed Virgin Mary does not come without its controversies. Over the course of my Christian journey I have come to have the deepest respect and love for Mary, but that doesn't mean I feel at all comfortable with the way in which, in some traditions, Mary seems to be magnified and Jesus diminished. Where that happens I believe it does a disservice to Mary – and in those circumstances I find myself wondering what Mary herself would want to say to those who so elevate her!

The reason I feel strongly about this is because the beauty and wonder that belongs to Mary is her humanity and ordinariness. Once we enshroud her with all kinds of speculative doctrines we lose what makes her such an inspiration for us. She was like us. And being like us we can see in what ways we can be like her.

So when I say that we honour Mary, and that she'll be at the heart of our Christmas celebration, it's because she was an example to us of how we too might respond to the call of God. In today's Gospel reading we hear the words of the 'Magnificat'. From this well-known 'Song of Mary' there are three themes that we can think about and wonder how they might indeed be an inspiration for us today: Mary's devotion; Mary's self-understanding; Mary's world view.

First, Mary's devotion

We know the familiar story of the angel Gabriel visiting Mary and announcing that she's to be the mother of the long-awaited Messiah. Not surprisingly she found this a rather troubling prospect. Nevertheless her response was: "Here am I the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word." Luke portrays Mary as a woman of faith who trusted in God.

This faith in God is given the most beautiful expression in the Magnificat: "My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour." She goes on to acknowledge that "the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name." As we come to the end of this season of Advent and stand on the edge of the Christmas celebrations we could reflect on how Mary's faith and devotion to God might be a help to us.

What could it mean for us to "Magnify the Lord"? The faith of Mary could be an inspiration to us as we consider how, in our day to day lives we might 'magnify the Lord'. Could we make time, in the ordinariness of our lives, to allow the wonder of the Mighty God, who has done great things for us, so to amaze us that, with Mary, our spirit rejoices?

It was Mary's faith and ability to trust in and magnify the Lord that fashioned and formed her. It was that devotion to God that enabled her to respond to – and fulfil – God's calling. As we grow in faith and find ourselves magnifying the Lord, we too will be fashioned and formed in the image of God. It will be our devotion that helps **us** recognise, respond to and fulfil God's calling to us.

In the light of this transforming awareness of God we think secondly about Mary's self-understanding...

What we know about Mary is that she was a young woman who lived in a small village in rural Palestine. Nazareth is not mentioned in the Old Testament and in the time of Mary it was probably an out-of-the-way hamlet of around 50 houses. It was 'insignificant'... So we can understand why, in the Magnificat, she would speak about God looking "with favour on the lowliness of his servant." She didn't have a privileged background. Just an ordinary village girl. She'd be in no danger of thinking to herself: "Well, of course, God has chosen me because I'm especially gifted and influential..." No, just a lowly servant of God.

She places herself firmly in the tradition of those whom God calls. When it comes to calling people to particular tasks God has a disconcerting habit of choosing the least likely people.

- Think of the couple who were chosen to be the forebears of God's people: the promise was that they would be a nation that would be as numerous as the stars in the sky. So what does God do? God chooses

Abraham and Sarah – an elderly couple, Sarah being well past child-bearing age! It was so preposterous that it made Abraham laugh. Yes, laughable – and explains why their son was called Isaac: meaning “He laughs”!

- When it came to finding a new king, who did God choose? Very deliberately God appoints the youngest and smallest son in a family – David, a shepherd boy.
- Much later Paul writes about this laughable way God chooses people. To Corinth he writes: ‘God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, so that no one might boast in the presence of God.’

So in the choice of Mary God is doing nothing unusual: God chooses the insignificant and lowly – and God does this so that no one can say: “Well, I’m not surprised God chose ME!” Mary described herself as lowly. She knew that God wasn’t choosing her because of her stature. God was choosing her because she was an ordinary country girl: in her and through her God’s wonder and redeeming love will be seen – and magnified!

How can this be an inspiration to us? Well, like Mary we can have a realistic self-understanding. We don’t have to think we’re remarkably special and gifted. It seems that doesn’t interest God. God calls us *because* we are just ordinary. Not because we are special in our own eyes or in the estimation of anyone else. God calls us because we are special to God. Nothing more. That’s it!

Like Mary, then, you might be surprised to discover that God is calling you. You can’t hide behind the fact that you’re not good enough or clever enough or influential enough – or any other kind of ‘enough’. Only that you’re ordinary enough! God calls ordinary, ‘insignificant’ people – like Mary. Like me. Like you.

And there’s one final piece to fit into the picture. Mary’s world view...

For a simple country girl Mary had a remarkable understanding of the ways of God. I call it *her* “world view” – but her world view was God’s “world view”.

What picture did we gain from the ‘Magnificat’ of how God is at work in the world?

- He has shown strength with his arm; (*not a weak and powerless God*)
- he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts; (*not impressed with the puffed up and self-important then*)
- he has brought down the mighty from their thrones; (*takes on those who are so elevated they think they’re invincible*)
- lifted up the lowly; (*oh, so cares about those whom the world thinks are not worth bothering about*)
- filled the hungry with good things; (*so, not just the comfortably-off who will enjoy the good life?*)
- and sent the rich away empty. (*well there’s a surprise: a very different world view!*)

What a controversial person Mary was! And she clearly had quite an influence on her son. When the adult Jesus came back to Nazareth to preach in the synagogue he said the same kind of things – and the people threw him out.

What is this telling us? In what way can Mary be an inspiration to us as we think about today’s world with its many challenges. Does God still have something to say about the proud and the mighty, the lowly and the hungry, about the rich? How is God calling us to share in the work of establishing the kingdom of God?

Mary saw the world in the light of God’s truth. Mary’s world view was God’s world view. Does God’s world view inform our thinking and our actions too? Sometimes we can work comfortably in the world – at other times we can’t, and we need to speak out. When do we decide that, in working for God’s kingdom, we have to make a stand – and perhaps take a more difficult path?

Today we remember and honour Mary: –

- we give thanks for her devotion to God;
- we are invited to reflect on our own self-understanding in the light of God’s grace;
- and we are challenged to think about our world view and how far that is aligned with the kingdom of God.

May this ordinary young woman who was willing to accept God’s unexpected call, inspire and encourage us.