

## **Magnificat** **Luke 1:46-55**

The magnificat, as we call it, is a hymn – quoted by Luke – that burst forth spontaneously from the lips of a pregnant teenager from a council estate in Nazareth. If this were an Anglican church, then it is a text that we would read together out loud every week – and one that we would therefore remember almost as well as we remember the Lord's prayer. And with my own Anglican background, it is a text deeply familiar to me.

But I can remember vividly the moment when this prayer took on a new life for me. As a student studying theology at Oxford, I was researching for an essay on Liberation Theology – a way of reading Scripture from the perspective of the oppressed. And here, the Magnificat was described as a hymn of political subversion. And I could not believe that I could know a text so well, and yet miss something so obvious. Scattering the proud, dethroning rulers, satisfying the hungry, offending the rich. How did I miss those things? These were the deep longings and expectations of an inspired teenager, pregnant with the hope of God's salvation for her oppressed world.

And ever since then, I feel almost angry when I imagine that throughout Christian history, this is a text that has been used in worship by the wealthy, the powerful, the oppressors, the most conservative characters imaginable – worshipping God through a radically subversive text! This is a text that makes demands of us, that stirs us to see the world differently, that challenges our status quo.

Mary's song, the Magnificat, speaks of a Messiah who will be politically active, who will establish justice, who will bring down oppressors and bring regime change. The only slight problem with the Magnificat is, that it is completely and utterly wrong! None of these promises were fulfilled, either in Luke's Gospel, or in the entire life span of the young teenager who uttered these words. The unjust leaders were still seated at their thrones – oppressive regimes continued unhindered, throughout the lifetime of Mary, throughout the first century – and in fact, right up to today! If this is what Jesus came to do – he failed!

By saying this, I am not questioning the word of God, but trying to take it seriously. Luke has told us that he has written a historically ordered account – and the more familiar you become with Luke's Gospel, the more you realise his economy of words – his careful wordcraft – he says nothing by accident, and he relates every passage of this gospel to every other. So why has he put in this place, at the very heart of the Gospel – an inspired, prophetic hymn about the future that does not come true?

Is it heretical to suggest that perhaps Mary got it wrong? Well the hymns we read in the Old Testament, from the book of psalms, are full of worshippers asking God to do things are clearly at odds with Well, if it is then both Luke and Jesus himself were heretics! Because Jesus corrects his mother and his family on more than one occasion! Jesus goes missing for three days, and when his mother gets angry, Jesus points out that he was bound to be in his father's house!

### **What did the hymn do?**

So, if Luke intends to show that Mary got it wrong, that her expectations were mistaken – in what ways were they mistaken? The first part of the hymn is absolutely right – that God has

remembered the humble state of Mary – her mind is blown that she could have such a central role in God’s plan to honour his promise to Abraham. When she says that from now on, all generations will call me blessed – she is talking about the descendants of Abraham – and knows that she is a key figure, that God’s promise to make Israel a powerful and righteous nation are being fulfilled through her! In fact, the reference to generations and generations appears three times in this short hymn.

And when first century Jews read and write of generations, the primary thought is the Abrahamic gene – the descendants of Abraham. It is the fulfilment of God’s purposes through these people – so, if these people today are oppressed, and God is promising to bring them liberation, then surely – the consequence is inevitably to do away with the oppressors, with those who are mistreating and marginalising the chosen people of God, the descendants of Abrahams. So surely, if God is acting today – that means bringing down rulers, lifting up nobodies, satisfying hunger and sending away the rich.

Mary’s spontaneous hymn of prayers, expresses the true hope of Israel – but also outlines how God is going to achieve them. Surely, if God is going to honour his promises, then he **MUST** act in this way! There is no other conceivable way for God to act, but decisive – political subversion. The Liberation theologians were right – this is a hymn of political subversion, but the hymn’s weakness is borne out by the rest of the Gospel story as Luke tells it. In the end, Jesus was crucified because he did not bring down the mighty from their thrones, he was not the great political revolutionary – which is why Barabbas was released in his place. This is why, as we heard last week – even the baby who leaps in the womb of the only other human being to hear the very first performance of this hymn, even John the Baptist sees what Jesus is up to and has to ask why he is not doing the things that a Messiah really ought to do!

My boys are very into their Battle of Britain fighter planes. I have to confess to being largely responsible for their love of these aircraft – but during the summer, on one of our trips to Duxford – our local aircraft museum – they noticed something. It was difficult not to notice them because you cannot get in or out of Duxford without walking through their massive toy-filled gift shop – and if you have three young boys, making it through this ordeal is perhaps something akin to a commanding a squadron through a dogfight!

But during the summer, as we ran the gauntlet through the gift shop, the boys caught sight of some large, wooden model aeroplanes – placed tantalisingly on a shelf just beyond their reach. The next three hours were punctuated with the liturgical refrain – can we buy that spitfire can we buy that spitfire can we buy that spitfire. Unfortunately, that spitfire cost £150. My liturgical response – no, I can’t afford it, no I can’t afford it, no I can’t afford it. Then come the words in bold type, **O Please, I want it, please.** It would have been fine, had they forgotten – but my boys like their planes too much. So, in the end, I said – Okay, you can have your carved wooden spitfire. Having gained such a decisive victory, they spent the next few months asking me to go and buy one.

Having granted them the carved wooden spitfires, they knew that the only way for me to get them, was to go and buy them. How else could I possibly get them. It was a fair assumption. It didn’t once occur to them that I might actually get some wood and a set of carving chisels, and try the job for myself. If you would like to see the scars on my hands, you will see the real cost of carving these things from scratch. The promise was fulfilled, but not in the way that they thought.

That is precisely the logic at work in Luke's Gospel. God has made a promise to bless Abraham and his descendants through the generations, to make Israel a great nation, to bring the whole earth to worship the one true God. So when God declares that this is about to happen, it is only natural that everyone concerned thinks they know exactly how God is going to go about achieving this: Zechariah the righteous priest, Mary the faithful teenager, John the prophetic Baptist. Each figure a representative of good and faithful and righteous Israel, all believed in the promise of God, but all thought they knew just how God was going to go about keeping his promise. But the Gospel shows that God kept his promise, but not in the way that people expected.

### **Contemporary World:**

Where do we position ourselves in relation to Mary? How can we sing this hymn? We don't live in an oppressed age, and we are not explicitly and obviously subject to the machinations of a brutal empire. But if our eyes are open, we do witness injustice in the world. We do feel it, in ourselves or for others. The world that God loves can be a horrible, nasty and unfair place. And we believe in a God of justice. And if God is going to keep his promise to bring new life in our world, if God is going to be a just and righteous God – then we can be tempted to think that we know what God must do and how God must act.

But is there are way to believe that God can keep his promises without at the same time offering him a set of instructions about how he will keep his promises? Or should we just accept that, like this pregnant teenager, we have a set of deeply held convictions that we cannot separate out from our hope in God? What we see with Mary, is that her expectations are transformed – and she stores them up in her heart.

I wonder how transformable are our assumptions. We want to see justice in our world, and often we have a good idea of how this can be achieved.

If you want a girlfriend – stop trying so hard to get one!

Whoever saves his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake and for the sake of the Gospel will find it.