

Advent IV, 2018

Magnificat

‘From this time forward, all generations shall call me blessed’ – there are probably few predictions in Scripture which have come so abundantly true as this one. As a child, I remember learning the ‘Hail Mary’ by rote in school; and besides the Lord’s Prayer, it is probably the most common prayer across the Christian world. ‘Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord be with thee. Blessed art thou amongst women, and blessed is the fruit of thy womb Jesus’. Irish state television still broadcasts the Angelus, which recalls the Angel Gabriel’s words to Mary, every day. Your church is only one of tens, perhaps hundreds, of thousands of churches dedicated to Mary across the world. ‘All generations shall call me blessed’. True words indeed.

One of the reasons why all this has come to be is that throughout the generations, Christians have seen that there’s something about Mary which has a meaning for us, something about her which teaches us how to be Christians. And that something is there in the Magnificat, Luke’s telling of what Mary said to Elizabeth right at the beginning of his Gospel, when the two pregnant women – one bearing Jesus, one John the Baptist – meet. But from the very beginning, the church has made those words its own, and what’s more, seen them as words to be sung, not just read. It has seen in them energy and exhilaration which calls for more than mere reading and speaking. ‘My soul doth magnify the Lord; my spirit has rejoiced in God my Saviour’ – this is the sound of a soul bursting out, of exhilaration in what God is doing, of sheer explosive joy. And Luke puts it right at the start of the Gospel, not only because it belongs there, with Jesus in the womb, but because it tells you what the rest of the story is going to be about. Explosive energy: the mighty put down, the proud scattered, the lowly lifted up - this is what the baby means. This is what the baby means – the overthrowing of the world.

The overthrowing of the world. Mary lived, like us, in a world with very obvious powers and limits. There was Herod and the Romans, poverty and tax-collectors, hunger and arrogance. The baby meant an end to all that. The baby was bringing a world where the things that seemed self-evident and fixed, all the structures of power and greed, would come to an end. He was bringing the Kingdom, and Mary knew that

that mighty deed of God was beginning to unfold right within her womb. That is why she sings: she knows she is caught up in the coming of the Kingdom. And if it is why Mary sang, it is also why others have frequently tried to stop the singing. When the great missionary Henry Martyn went out to Calcutta as chaplain to the East India company in 1805, he was appalled to find that the British authorities had banned the singing of the Magnificat at Evensong – you couldn't sing *that* in front of the natives, thank you. Ditto the right-wing governments of Argentina and Guatemala in the 1970s and 80s: they knew a revolutionary song when they heard one, and so they too silenced Mary's words.

You might think that this was just a silly over-reaction. After all, the baby the song was first about has come and gone, and the Kingdom is not here. It is tempting to think that Mary's song was a big mistake, or to think instead that it is some strange kind of code, and doesn't really mean what it says – that the rich won't really be cast down, the hungry not really filled with good things. That it means something spiritual, something not about real economics and politics and lives. It is very tempting to give up on Mary's song. But the New Testament calls us to something considerably stranger and harder. It says two things. It says first, *wait*. Yes, history is taking a long time, but wait and you will see that it is all in God's hands, that the Kingdom will come. That is what the resurrection means: that whatever the old world does to the kingdom, does to the new life of justice and joy, it cannot stop it – any more than a great stone on his tomb could stop Christ. He is risen, and he will indeed come again in glory to judge – to put right – the living and the dead.

But it says secondly, and this is the key thing for today, *it is over to you*. Because 'You are the body of Christ' – that is what the Bible teaches and what is said to every Christian as they come to communion. We are the body of Christ: what was growing inside Mary, what made her sing, is coming into the world again today – but this time it is coming as you and me. You and me, the community that exists around this altar – for the moment, while we wait for Him to come in glory, we are to be his presence in the world. The new life of justice and joy happens here: just as it happened around Jesus, it is to happen around us – we are to be the place where the world is overthrown, and where people want to sing Mary's song.

That is an amazingly tall order. What does it mean to be the place where the world is overthrown? It is probably easiest to describe what it means by pointing to one of my biggest failures to make it happen, or help it happen. In a primary school where I used to take assemblies, the headteacher took me aside one day to tell me of two small boys who were being picked on. They were being picked on because they smelled, and they smelled because the washing machine at home had broken. Mum was on her own, abandoned by a useless man; she couldn't afford to fix it, and she was so depressed and defeated that even a trip to the laundrette seemed beyond her. The headteacher wanted to know if there was anything I could do. And much to my shame, I mumbled I would see what I could do ... and failed to do anything.

Now, apart from firing a useless vicar, how should the Body of Christ deal with a situation like that? I'm sure the answer to that question has its complexities, but in essence, its pretty simple. We're a big group of people, and between us we have ample time, energy, and money. We can get the clothes washed, we can give lifts to the laundrette, we can buy a new washing machine, we can help in all sorts of little practical ways and over time, maybe, we can be friends with the family and help them through. It isn't rocket science, but it does call for imagination. It calls for the vision to see that being the Church is about more than running a religious club, more than organising bible studies and Sunday services. What do we mean when we call ourselves the Body of Christ, unless we make Christ present in the world? And what would Christ being present in the world mean for that mother and her children; what would it mean for all of those struggling around us, bowed down under the weight of their troubles? My guess is that it would mean something like Mary's song: it would mean that suddenly they knew the world was being overthrown, that freedom had dawned.

The Church of England spends a lot of time worrying about declining attendance, about where all the young people are, about how to pay for itself. We worry a lot about being dull, and wonder how we can make our services more attractive, to compete with Sunday morning sports or shopping or whatever. It might help, sometimes, to focus rather more on what we are meant to be. I don't know how things are in Week, but if the Church across this nation was truly the Church, things would be different. If people knew that here they were loved, that here people would bear

their burdens, from the dirty laundry to the most broken life, the energy in our Church would be astonishing. It would be an energy that could only be expressed in song, an energy that could find no better words than Mary's: my soul magnifies the Lord, my Spirit rejoices in God my Saviour. We are the Body of Christ. Through our life together, may this song be sung again with Mary, sung in Cornwall and Cambridge and across our nation.

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