

St Luke's

Reading: Luke 1:47-55

I was on a zoom meeting with people in Fiji on Thursday. I was struck by just how difficult things are for them. Their archbishop has just died, and they explained that they have been in lockdown for four months. Four months of physical distancing, masks, and hand washing. Six of their clergy have been ordered by the Health Department to stay in isolation and hundreds have been dying. To make matters worse, while we were speaking, a tropical storm came through slowing the internet to a crawl. I was deeply moved by their plight. You may have had the experience of being deeply moved by the needs of another recently.

Today we celebrate St Mary, the mother of Jesus, and the gospel reading is her song - the Magnificat. Beloved of the evensong worshipper, the Magnificat is Mary's song of praise at being chosen by God. It recalls how God's kingdom is the upside-down kingdom, where "the proud are scattered in the imaginations of their hearts, the powerful are brought down and the lowly lifted up. The hungry have good things and the rich are sent empty away." When we see this happening, we are seeing God at work. When we work for this to happen, we can be said to be doing the work of God.

Because old Anglicans have sung and said the Magnificat for so long, it may have begun to lose some of its radical edge.

This was not so in the time of the Raj when Britain ruled India. So worried were the ruling British elite that the locals might listen to these words of Mary's and take them seriously that the verses of Luke 1:47-55 were banned in public worship.

This wasn't an isolated example either. In the 1970's when the Magnificat was said, the poor of Latin America used to chant, "Do it again Lord, do it again!" So, the authorities asked that it not be read because it was stirring up the people.

I wonder if it stirs you up. Sometimes Kiwis are described as the passionless people but it's pretty hard to remain passionless if you take the Magnificat seriously.

I want to look more closely at the passion of this well-known reading.

The first verse. *My soul magnifies the Lord.*

To really give praise to God is a subversive upside-down act. Because we are naming who it really is who gives us joy. Meaning, fulfilment, happiness are all gifts of God. We find true happiness not in what we own, not in our jobs, but in our identity as children of God. The world would have us believe that true happiness is found in what we do as a job or the amount of money we can call on or in the size of our house. But real happiness comes from our relationship with God.

Verse 48; *For God has looked with favour on the lowliness of his servant.*

Mary was the lowliest of the low. She lived in an age where woman's work and the word of a woman was of no account. If you took someone to court, then it was no use getting a woman to testify because they had no legal status. And yet in the upside-down kingdom a woman is chosen. Mary lived on the edge of the empire in a place of no account and with a people of no account. And yet God had chosen her.

*Surely from now on all generations will call me blessed.*

Never has a truer word been spoken. On every continent this reading is sung and chanted, read, and reflected on. Mary is regarded as the blessed one. Never has one woman been so celebrated in so many languages across history in so many places.

The next section is especially for the upside-down kingdom. One book I read recently described the job of Christians as bringing comfort to the afflicted and affliction to the comfortable. It's easy to bring comfort to the afflicted. We do this well to people in grief and in sickness. To afflict the comfortable this is much more difficult because the comfortable are you and me. If the world is divided into the haves and have nots, then we are the haves. We are the ones who are living, as we sometimes say, as the other half live. If we have running water in our homes, electricity in our light bulbs and schools for our kids, we are the privileged few.

God is and will scatter us, the proud in the imaginations of our hearts.

Are we actively joining God in his stated intention of filling the hungry with good things, and sending the rich away empty?

The Anglican Missions Board is collecting for what they describe as food security for Fiji. This is another way of saying people are going hungry because of COVID. They need our prayers and our money but the most important gift these people need is hope. All the aid and good will in the world is no good if hope has died. That's why the ministry of the church is so important in Fiji. It keeps hope alive. Comfort to the afflicted and afflicting the comfortable in that land.

Finally, we see the hoped-for Messiah. Jesus is the fulfilment of the hopes of Israel, the people of God, *according to the promise he made to our ancestors.*

Is this Magnificat going to be for us a living document, giving us God's mandate for God's purpose in the world, or is it just something we can consign to the past going misty eyed with nostalgia when we hear it sung by the choir of King's College Cambridge?

Doing some homework would be a good way into it.

Why not write a Magnificat of your own?

Begin as Mary did by recalling your praise of God – stating what it is about God's faithfulness that makes your heart want to sing. Recall how, even though we are of no real account living as we do on the far side of the world in a forgotten corner, God still calls you and I blessed, God chooses you and I and He has done mighty things for us. Recall how God is at work in your life in the joy of friends and family, in your church family. Recall unjust places of the world and ask that God comes in great power to afflict the comfortable.

Finally, why not give thanks for those in your family who have held the torch of faith up high, those alive and those dead. For God has been good to our ancestors without whom we would not be singing his praise here today.

*This is my Magnificat:*

*In my soul I cry out with joy to God...*

*here in this twice discovered land, where garden, river, mountain, bush, and sea rejoice the heart. You have been so good to me that my heart aches with praise and the birds of the air pick up my clumsy canticle.*

*Who am I that you should choose me? And yet you have reached down and blessed me, and you call me your beloved child.*

*In the overturning of unjust regimes I marvel at your hand.*

*You call me to account for all the wealth and privilege you have given me.*

*My ancestors chose to follow you, even to this land,*

*and for as long as anyone can tell they have relied on your name.*

*Be with those that go after me O Lord*

*As I give thanks for all you are doing now and forever. Amen*