

Message

Luke's Gospel, known as that of the poor and also that of women, is the one we hear from this Christmas. Today we heard Luke's account of the annunciation of the angel Gabriel to Mary, and also Mary's song of praise in response to the announcement.

Mary's advent hymn, commonly called the *Magnificat*, is rooted in Hannah's prayer from 1 Samuel. The *Magnificat* is a wonderful piece of poetic literature, but it's also much more. The first century was a time of Roman military occupation, a time when the justice system was seriously biased, and wealth inequality had grown to staggering proportions.

This was a time where any threat to the dominant order or sniff of rebellion would be met with brutal and violent force. This song of praise, from the mouth of a young girl, pregnant, unmarried in an ancient androcentric world, was filled not with some quirky Christmas notion about a baby that doesn't cry, it was a hymn of revolutionary joy. Dietrich Bonhoeffer described it as 'the most passionate, most vehement, one might say, most revolutionary Advent hymn ever sung.' So, here at the prelude to Jesus birth story we hear of the significance of what is to come, the hope, justice, peace and love that grows in the womb of an unwed, pregnant girl.

The voice of this *Magnificat* is not that of a gentle, passive child, it's the voice of a young girl bringing to life the words of the prophetic women who have gone before her, women like Deborah and Judith. In Luke, Mary is a girl of power and passion, who sings with authority of God; God who has 'brought down the powerful from their thrones,' and 'lifted up the lowly'; God who 'has filled the hungry with good things and sent the rich away empty.'

In this hymn Mary proclaims that God is coming, and that God will shatter all expectations. Mary preaches as a prophet of the poor, her words emphasise the great reversal and transformation that this child, her child, will bring. Her words present a faithful vision of community, a vision of freedom from systemic injustice, from oppression by political rulers on their thrones and by the arrogant and the rich.

This blessed community will be one where the last become first, it will be a community of inclusion and welcome, it will be a community of love. It will be a community that reminds those people who look at others with indifference and superiority, that God looks at all with burning love. In this vision, those once viewed as contemptible, as worthy only of being cast out, will be declared blessed. In this narrative there are echoes of the Beatitudes from Jesus' Sermon on the Mount.

As we recall this radical and revolutionary hymn that was uttered more than two thousand years ago, we do so in preparation of Christmas. A challenge maybe in waiting on the Christ Child, who brings peace and love, because as we look around, we can see that the world is not yet ruled by love. No doubt there are many wonderful expressions of reconciled and reconciling relationships, but things are not quite right. The powers of this world still rely on military force to defend land and rights. People are still discriminated against and excluded from many communities.

People, even families, set up their beds on streets or in cars, and domestic and family violence exists within our neighbourhoods. Mental health difficulties are on the increase, particularly in light of this year's pandemic. It's not quite right! I know, we're heading to Christmas, a time of hope, joy, peace and love, but that's the reason we need to name these matters, because when we hear this advent hymn, we are reminded what life as a disciple of Jesus calls us to.

The church, our faith even, may have become comfortable, safe, and that's not quite right. I'm not suggesting that it's not good to feel comfortable within the body, or the community, we are companions on the journey of faith, strengthening and upholding one another. What I am saying is that our faith is a strange one, we proclaim a crucified risen Lord. Michael Frost suggests; 'we need to shape the world in the weirdness which was the way of Jesus.' The faith we proclaim calls us to dare to sing revolutionary hymns like that of Mary. It calls us to speak out and share the dangerous truth of the gospel, it calls us to continue the work of bringing about the fullness of the strange upside-down kingdom, it's about being a welcoming, diverse community with a renewed and radical vision.

Our identities can be shaped by God, we can be a people unafraid of controversy, just as the gospel message itself was a challenge to the status quo in Jesus' time. We are called to hear the voiceless, to bless the lowly, to see as Mary saw, the new paradigm for the world in which we live. As disciples we are to be at mission that is empowered by the gospel.

God acts on behalf of marginalised and exploited people, God prepares for the future through God's people living lives of love, compassion and welcome, by practicing Godly justice now. The hope that is offered through the Law and the Prophets, through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus is not about an afterlife, it's a hope for this life, it's hope that this world will be transformed by love.

This song of praise, this Advent hymn, comes from the mouth of a young village girl who will become Θεοτόκος, (Theotokos) God bearer, mother of Jesus. It's a hymn that ushers in a new age, 'revealing divine love as merciful, close, interested in the poor and the weak, ready to hear human needs.' This hymn tells of tables being turned, in the coming of a new social order. This is the beginning of what Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan call '*the great divine clean-up of the world.*'

Much more than a beautiful poetic piece of literature, this hymn is an invitation to participate in the great divine clean up. As disciples there is no role of spectator; we're called to become participants in this world transforming activity.

So, this revolutionary hymn is not just for Mary, it was and is a vision of hope for the homeless, the poor, the broken, the outcast, the exploited, it is hope that things cannot stay the same; it's hope of an amazing change that's in gestation waiting to be birthed. This hymn of praise is our hymn too. The challenge is simple, dare we sing such a song of praise that flies in the face of the status quo and challenges that which is still not quite right.

Prayer

Blessed be you Holy One, for you transform and upturn the world, you fill the empty, and bring down the lofty, you reign with love and compassion, caring for the least and the lost. Send your Spirit upon us, may She touch our hearts and our lips, may She fill us with a deep yearning to continue the work of Transforming Love in the world and may we take courage to sing songs of liberation, hope and justice. Amen

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