

MARY AND MAGNIFICAT A Prophetic Church Advent 4 All Souls' 2024 dtw

Luke 1.39-45 are some words that a good number of us will have sung over the years, attending Evensong on Sunday nights, and no doubt, in other contexts. They are known as *The Magnificat*. Personally, over too many decades, I never fully grasped the radical message in these words, probably being more preoccupied with the poignancy of the worship and the beauty of the song. So, I want to unpack this with you this morning.

Following the annunciation by the angel to Mary and her surrendering response 'Let it be', immediately she goes to see Elizabeth. These two holy women on the outskirts of empire and society are not having some mutual baby shower. They are trail-blazing prophets literally pregnant with the spiritual fission of global transformation. We don't usually think of Mary, the mother of Jesus, as a prophet, but indeed Mary was. When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, Luke tells us, the baby in her womb leapt for joy in the presence of the Lord. This is not merely a description of typical baby movement, but leaping and dancing were common expressions of joy depicted in the Hebrew Scriptures. Elizabeth acknowledges the great privilege given to Mary as the mother of the Saviour, whom she immediately calls 'my Lord', and blesses her. We must not forget that in later life John Baptist was by no means certain that Jesus was 'the Coming One' whose way he had been sent to prepare, (Lk 7.18) although he was finally convinced. Right now, we get the story from the divine perspective of the prenatal relationship in the predestined plan of God. This is also the case with Mary's blessedness. Her greatness is measured by the greatness of her son and that she believed there would be a fulfilment of what was spoken to her from the Lord.

Mary's words which follow are the prescription for her son's destiny. As I said, many of us know this piece as the *Magnificat*, and like the *Benedictus* and *Nunc Dimittis* which follow, it gets its name from the first word of the song in the Vulgate version of the Bible. All three are a mosaic of Hebrew texts, and the Magnificat is based largely on the Song of Hannah in 1Samuel 2.1-10, which we said in place of the Psalm in November, but - with one large and contrasting exception. It is non-violent. Luke's good news in Jesus Christ is of a non-violent, peaceful but active, status-reversing revolution of love and justice. Mary sings of her own exaltation from lowliness to greatness as typical of the new order which is to open out for the whole people of God through the coming of her son. She uses the past tense, "he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts...he has brought down the powerful...", not to describe God's past care for the down-trodden, but because God has already taken decisive action in the promised sending of his Son, and Mary foresees, in true prophetic style, as an accomplished fact, the results that will follow in his mission.

The Magnificat is a Manifesto of a non-violent religious and social revolution. For centuries the Jews had lived under foreign occupation and tyranny, which allowed no one to be wealthy or powerful except the collaborators. 'The poor' had become almost a technical term for the faithful adherents of the Law, who trusted to God alone for their ultimate deliverance and vindication. Jesus was to take up this hope for the reversal of human fortunes and rid it of its limitations of nationalism and self-righteousness, both of which ironically, are still so present in their culture and other western democracies today. Luke's Gospel, more than any of the others, has such a profound concern for this justice and hope to reign on earth; of course, the words only refer to Israel, Abraham and his descendants. *They* sure need it, but might all world leaders say the Magnificat at the start of each day and name their own country and descendants when they do! Little by little our world would begin to change in wholeness and righteousness, including this nation, multicultural Australia, and her descendants forever.

Like Hannah before her, Mary begins with words of overwhelming joy echoing also the words of Isaiah 61, 'I will greatly rejoice in the Lord, my whole being shall exult in my God; for he has clothed me with the garments of salvation, he has covered me with the robe of righteousness.' In Mary's case, she is both spiritually and physically filled with salvation and righteousness, and the rest of her song unfolds the enormous consequences of this conception for the world. Her words are no less than the manifesto of the incarnate Word, Jesus, within her womb. This is the prescription of the Christ coming from the lips of the God-bearer herself: the *Theotokos*. This, then, by implication, is the prescription for the body of Christ, the Church. Us! Like Isaiah, John Baptist and Mary, we are all called to live prophetic lives.

It is not easy to listen to the words of the prophets; we hear but do not hear; we pay attention, but it is hard to pay the cost. Peace activist Daniel Berrigan described a prophet as one who simply speaks the truth to a culture of lies. His brother Philip once wrote, 'The poor show us who we are and the prophets tell us who we could be, so we hide the poor and kill the prophets'.

Mary's song, along with Micah's vision, is about a revolution, not of force, but of VALUES. This world's values are turned upside down by the values of the Kingdom: princes and rulers in high places are cast down from their thrones and the poor are exalted; the hungry are fed and the rich are sent away empty. Like Mary and all the prophets, may we be filled with the hope of salvation and justice, and then by the grace and power of God, give birth to it in all we plan, say and do.