

St Peter and St Paul Great Missenden 20.12.09 8.00 and 10.00

Magnificat -Luke 1. 39-55

*Almighty God may our ears be attentive to your word this morning and our lives attentive to your word always. Amen*

Despite the millions of statues, despite the millions of prayers, despite the millions of *Hail Mary's* -we know so little about this woman.

In all probability she was a teenager -some place her as young as fifteen or sixteen. We talk about her as a single mum -poor and vulnerable -but she may well have been from a good family -she was related to Elizabeth -an aunt maybe -who was married to the priest Zechariah -so there was education around.

Then she was engaged. The family stuff had been done -dowry possibly -plans for the wedding. Fiancé Joe – he was a skilled carpenter – well able to provide for a family.

It all adds up to a pretty typical local family -Mary probably excited about the wedding plans -and yes – a baby would hopefully follow pretty fast -she didn't want to be in Elizabeth's shoes -no baby -and well past hoping.

We know that as a mum she was like the rest of us. She had hysterics when Jesus went missing -and sounds as if she tore him off a strip when she found him chatting in the temple. We know that she did indeed experience a pain like a sword driven into her own heart as she watched her beloved son dying.

Anyone who has seen Michelangelo's *Pieta* in St Peter's in Rome will have shared a little tiny bit in that heartbreak.

The story even beings in a way that we can empathise with. An Angel pitches up and Mary is frightened. She hears the words about God, and giving birth to a son -a son who be great and be called the Son of the most high -and her response it perfectly literal -'hang on a moment -I'm a virgin -can't be.'

Without really understanding it she accepted this -and I guess we might have too – after all it was a bit of a done deal -and it is quite remarkable what humans can cope with if they have to.

So her life suddenly took a new turn and she simply got on with it.

She decides, having heard what the Angel said about her Aunt -to pay her a visit. You find pregnant women do that -they need to talk things over -and they had a while -Mary stayed for three months.

Still all pretty normal -under the circumstances.

Then as she meets Elizabeth these simply wonderful words pour out of her.

The Magnificat: said and sung around the world over the centuries.

The art and music -the poetry and dance, the theology that has been created in response to these words certainly demonstrates what a deep chord it strikes.

There is nothing new under the sun -and I'm sure I can't add anything to that great store of riches. So I'm simply going to tell you a little of what these words mean to me -maybe they will resonate in some small way.

Firstly I confess that there is huge joy in finding these words are the words of a *woman* when it is almost exclusively the innermost thoughts of men that we are given in the bible.

We hear about the internal struggles of David, we join Job in his search for the meaning of suffering, we are treated to Paul's dazzling intellect and passionate arguments -but we hardly get any glimpses at all into the deep spiritual life of any women. We hear about what they did -we know how they plotted for their sons, or even fought for their country -but basically we women don't get to speak for ourselves that much -not then -not for the next 2.000 years.

Yes. I know that for the word 'man' we are supposed to think 'human being' but there is something about having one's spirituality filtered through an unremittingly male perspective which is hard work and sometimes alienating.

We even get Elizabeth's story earlier in the same chapter second hand. It's really all about Zechariah. I love the little sentence 'his wife Elizabeth became pregnant and for five months remained in seclusion' -went off for a bit of peace I should say!

It is this issue of voice. The Magnificat gives women a voice in the bible. Not an action or an opinion, but an expression of who she is and how her soul beats.

*And it is beautiful!*

This is one of the reasons why I am strongly in favour of women bishops. The Christian voice -the voice which speaks the good news about Christ into our country is still male -always male. It isn't the whole voice of our faith -it is the male voice of our faith. When we say 'this is what we believe' then it lacks credibility until the 'we' includes women

So -that is the voice -as you might guess I could continue -but let's move on.

I personally can't see Mary as 'other' than any other human being. She was a ordinary person -but she was right with God. And this means that words that flow out of her are a wonderful example of how we can think and feel when get 'being human' really right.

*The Message* puts the angel's greeting like this:

"Good morning!

You're beautiful with God's beauty,

Beautiful inside and out!

God be with you.’

So there’s a gold standard to start with -what makes us lovely is having the life of God in us -having God’s beauty shining out of us. –We know it don’t we? We’ve all met someone, someone who might not be in any way TV beautiful -who is truly lovely because of something that shines out of them -and that something will be love -love makes you lovely.

It’s a world -view in which she finds her worth in the way God treats her -she is amazed at his love and delighted to collaborate with his plans. We often discuss the concept of co-creating our lives with God -here we have it LITERALLY! Life –the life of the son of God – is being created -God’s creative spark –as it were -the Holy Spirit -and then Mary -growing that life within her.

It is brilliant -but in a funny sort of way it is not unique –or at least it shouldn’t be -it is how any emerging human life should be.

The next thing that stands out for me is grace. Long before all the theology of the epistles Mary has grasped it. Her response is not in any way to feel that she deserved or earned God’s favour - she simply praises him for choosing to work through her. God deems her worthy of this task -she does not see herself in that way -she says ‘he has been mindful of the humble state of his servant.’

Grace -God’s undeserved but wonderful favour. It rested upon Mary -and it rests upon us. So key message -right at the heart of the Gospel -God loves us because he loves us. No way can we earn it -we cannot claim to be worthy by our own efforts, but he can and does let his love flow into our lives because he chooses to -because he just loves us. That is what God is like. That is who God is.

So -we have a woman here who has been called to what is I guess the most sacred task ever -to nurture God -from embryo to manhood.

And her response is a song in which she describes and praises this God whom she serves. In the description lies the timeless challenge of the Magnificat.

She is praising a God who is one hundred percent behind the weak and the oppressed in his world. We simply can’t avoid the obvious. Mary’s praise -her worship is for God who is active in his commitment to the poor, the hungry, the powerless. The Advent message is clear -if we –like Mary -are to get hold of what it is to be a switched-on, complete and God-filled human being -then that has to be where we too put our energy. Being an advocate for the oppressed is not an optional extra for one or two Christians who are that way inclined. To be growing towards God means growing in our commitment to make a difference in the world -a difference for those who are most in need, who are most humble, who are most powerless.

It is far too easy to see Mary as that cute kid with a blue headscarf from the school nativity play. Not at all. Her message is radical -and for us living the life of comfort in Great Missenden -very uncomfortable. We worship a God who calls us to enact his commitment to those in need.

As a church -the Church of England, this is a timely reminder that we undermine that message by giving the impression that we are more concerned about the sexuality of our priests than the hungry bellies of our brothers and sisters.

As individuals it is helpful to remember that Mary's song sprang out of her knowledge that she was loved and chosen by God.

*We* are loved and chosen by God. He has a sacred task for *all* of us to do for him.

In saying 'yes' to that calling -as Mary did, it will put a song in our hearts and it will almost certainly lead us into a fresh commitment to act -act as God's hands for the poor and needy and oppressed in the world. It is a hard but joyful and sacred calling. May God grant us the grace to respond to his call on our lives.

In Jesus name. Amen