

Fourth Sunday of Advent, Year C

Luke 1:39-55

Micah 5:2-5a; Hebrews 10:5-10

I'm sure many of us here have sat in a parish church or cathedral during a service of Choral Evensong, listening to one of the great choral settings of the Magnificat – Mary's Song of Praise – sung impeccably by the choristers and lay clerks. It's one of the great traditions of the Church of England. I have to say, though, that on many an occasion when I've sat in such services, it has caused me to think about just how far removed all this is from the *original* context in which the words of the Magnificat were uttered, and above all, how far removed the *content* of Mary's song – what she's actually saying here – is from the opulent and luxurious surroundings of an English cathedral.

Because Mary poured forth the amazing words of her song, *not* in a great place of worship, but in the home of her distant relative Elizabeth, already pregnant with John the Baptist – out in the hill

country of Judea. In fact, it's interesting to note that straight after the angel had announced to Mary that she had been chosen to be the mother of Jesus, she got herself ready and hurried off to see Elizabeth. So, it has been suggested – though, of course, we can't know for sure – that what Luke is implying is that the moment when Mary conceived was when she uttered her song of thanksgiving. The moment of her meeting with Elizabeth was, after all, a moment which was resplendent with the presence of the Holy Spirit. Luke notes that Elizabeth "was filled with the Holy Spirit" when she pronounces her blessings upon Mary, and in turn, Mary responds with her great song of praise. So perhaps this is the moment when – as the angel Gabriel announced to Mary – the Holy Spirit came upon her and the power of the Most High overshadowed her, and she conceived.

Now Mary's song itself has echoes of the song of Hannah, which is recorded in chapter 2 of the First Book of Samuel. Hannah was someone who had had difficulty conceiving, but in response to her request to God, she was able to conceive and gave birth to

Samuel. And so, her song *there* was uttered in thanksgiving to God for his answer to her heartfelt prayer. And just as Hannah's song is closely related to Hannah's experience of God's work in *her* life, so Mary's song, too, is closely bound up with *Mary's* own story. In fact, the rather radical statements in the Magnificat are, in a sense, both personal to Mary *and* of much broader significance.

So, first of all, the song reminds us that God didn't choose someone of great wealth and status in order to enter our world, but rather a humble Jewish girl living somewhere on the fringes of the Roman Empire. It's not surprising that when the angel announced to Mary that *she* had been chosen for this great task, her initial reaction was one of amazement – 'why *me* of all people?' She was somewhat taken aback by the very suggestion that *she* was being called by God to play such a key role in his purposes for the world – why should *she* be the one entrusted with the task of bringing into being the longed-for Messiah? It would certainly have been more understandable if *Elizabeth* was the one

chosen for this task, as she was married to Zechariah, a priest serving in the Temple in Jerusalem, a member of the Jewish religious elite. And yet it is *Mary* who is blessed with the *greater* honour and privilege. So, it was fitting that when Mary later reflected upon her calling in her great song of praise, she should describe herself in such humble terms – that God had "looked with favour on the lowliness / humble state of his servant" (literally, his 'slave girl' or 'bondmaid'). The Mighty One had indeed done great things for her. And that's why, too, she could boldly declare, "Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed."

Today, God continues to call *us* ordinary, seemingly insignificant, Christians to do *extraordinary* things in his Name. We should never think that we're too old or too unworthy to be called by the Lord to share in the work of his Kingdom; nor should we think that we simply don't have anything to offer. Even if we are unable to get about to do things, we can share in God's Kingdom work through prayer – the most vital ministry of all. The thing is, if we allow him to, God

can indeed work through each one of us in ways that far exceed our expectations. Just as Mary was empowered by the Holy Spirit to carry out the task to which *she* had been called, so the Lord will grant *us* the help of his Spirit in the tasks to which he calls *us*. So, are *we* willing to say ‘yes’ to the Lord’s calling upon *our* lives to share in his work, just as Mary had done?

Then secondly, alongside the way in which the song reflects Mary’s *personal* calling, it speaks too of the fact that in Jesus, the promises made by God to Abraham – the great ancestor of the Jewish people – would find their ultimate fulfilment. As Mary puts it, God has helped his servant Israel by remembering the promises he had made to Abraham centuries earlier. And what were those promises about? Well, God had promised Abraham that a great nation – the people of Israel – would come from his offspring. God promised that they would inherit a land – the land of Canaan. And most importantly for *us*, through Israel, all the nations of the earth would be blessed. The people of Israel always had a destiny

which had *worldwide* implications. And so now the Jewish Messiah, the perfect Israelite, comes to bring *all* peoples back to God. As the prophet Micah puts it, the one who comes from Bethlehem to rule in Israel “shall be great to the *ends of the earth*”. It’s a reminder to us Gentile believers that our salvation comes from Israel’s Messiah, particularly through his sacrificial death on the Cross and his resurrection from the dead; as our reading from the Letter to the Hebrews puts it, “we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all.”

And then thirdly, there are the universal, far-reaching *social* implications of Mary’s song. I think there’s a danger that the words of the Magnificat can become so familiar to us that we actually lose sight of the socially radical nature of what Mary is actually saying here. Living as we do in the relative comfort of our western society, we can so easily be tempted to ‘spiritualise’ it all. But what we have here speaks to us of *social* transformation; on the one hand, the thoughts of the proud are scattered, the powerful are brought down from their thrones and

the rich are sent away empty, while on the other, the lowly are lifted up and the hungry fed with good things. The hopes, *not* only of God's chosen people Israel, but of *all* humankind are reflected in what God has done in Mary's life; the old order has already been overturned because God has passed over the proud, the mighty and the rich, and instead has chosen this *lowly* handmaiden to be the mother of Our Lord.

This is all about God's reign of justice. States, kingdoms and rulers of the world might think they're invincible – but in the end, it's *God* who is sovereign over all – *he* will have the last word. This is *not* some kind of a political manifesto – it's *not* about endorsing a particular political party or ideology - but rather this is *God's* agenda. And the Church – the agent of God's Kingdom in the world – ought to be leading the way in living out this radical agenda. But sadly, all too often over the centuries of Christian history, the Church has served to *uphold* the oppressive structures of society, rather than *challenge* them. Even the Church of England has not

been averse to such an approach. We think, for instance, of the way in which it has for centuries sought to uphold the class divisions of society, even trying to falsely find theological justification for it – just think of the ghastly words from the original version of *All things bright and beautiful*, 'The rich man in his castle, the poor man at his gate, he made them high and lowly, and ordered their estate.' And then there's the way in which the Church quite happily went along with, and even gained financially out of the proceeds of slavery, until a small group of mainly evangelical activists started a campaign against the evils of the slave trade; as John Wesley encouraged William Wilberforce in the last letter he ever wrote, 'Go on, in the name of God and in the power of His might, till even American slavery (the vilest that ever saw the sun) shall vanish away before it.'

Today, *we* can be God's agents for social justice in the world. So, the question for *us* is, 'Are *we* prepared to partner with God in bringing justice to the oppressed?' 'Are *we* willing to stand in solidarity

with the lowly?’ There are plenty of opportunities to do so in our *own* communities, as we seek to welcome and minister to those on the margins of society in our own neighbourhoods. And there are plenty of opportunities to support those in need in so many different circumstances around the world, both through our prayers and our finances. As believers, we shouldn’t be seeking to live in our own little bubble, trying to shut out of our minds the sufferings of the world. On the contrary, we ought to be those who are motivated by Christ’s *limitless* compassion.

So, on the first Sunday of Advent, we focused in on the challenge for us to be ready at all times for Christ’s return in glory. Then on the second and third Sundays, as we have considered the message and ministry of John the Baptist, we have been challenged to think about what it means for us to repent – to turn back to God – and in the light of *that*, to live a radically transformed life. And today, our main challenge is to look outwards to the wider society and globally, to be agents of God’s

transformation in the world. So whenever we hear those seemingly familiar words of the Magnificat, let’s remember that they do indeed have something profoundly challenging to say to us today as we come to celebrate once more the nativity of the King of kings, who was born ‘*not* in a royal house or hall, but in a stable dark and dim, the Word made Flesh a Light for all.’

Let us pray:

Heavenly Father, as we give thanks today for your calling upon Mary’s life to be the mother of your Son, help us to discern your call upon each of *our* lives, and grant us the strength of your Holy Spirit to live out that calling. Help us, too, to grasp afresh the radical message of Mary’s song and to put this into practice in our own lives. In Jesus’ name.
Amen.