

Sermon Advent 3A

15 December 2013

Magnificat

Luke 1:46-56

'Born in poverty
died in custody
in an age of technology'

Peter Millar from the Iona Community recalls seeing these confronting words written on the wall of a glittering office block in Brisbane some years ago.

'They say so much about our interconnected, yet strangely disconnected world. It seems like a cliché, but we certainly live in fragile times, permeated with a range of new uncertainties for our planet and ourselves.'

For many, these are dark days, and 'for those of us who believe in an engaged Christianity, which takes seriously the strange pluralities and ambiguities of these times, the question remains:

How do we celebrate the amazingly good news of the incarnation while remaining in touch with the suffering which reaches into the daily lives of perhaps the majority of our sisters and brothers?

'That is a huge question. It is clear we cannot celebrate Christmas in some kind of false comfort, rich in Woollies goodies, disconnected from the world's suffering. And we certainly cannot retreat into a superficial Christian fundamentalism, which regards the world as essentially a 'dark place' that must be left behind at all costs....' Peter Millar p188 Candles and Conifers

From Paul Turley

On November 26, 2013, the Vatican released Pope Francis' apostolic exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*, or *The Joy of the Gospel*. In this letter to "the Christian faithful," Francis directly tackles inequality and specifically the "trickle down" economic theory.

"Some people continue to defend trickle-down theories which assume that economic growth, encouraged by a free market, will inevitably succeed in bringing about greater justice and inclusiveness in the world. This opinion, which has never been confirmed by the facts, expresses a crude and naïve trust in the goodness of those wielding economic power and in the sacralised workings of the prevailing economic system. Meanwhile, the excluded are still waiting."

As the Washington Post reported, "Many of the world's richest countries are experiencing historic levels of income inequality. And even in the developing world, there are emerging concerns about whether workers will benefit from their countries' increasing prosperity."

So what is the way forward?

As Christmas draws closer, we all know there are no quick fixes-not for the people of South Africa, not for Mick, the homeless man I met in Queanbeyan last week, not for my friend who has been unsuccessfully seeking a job in his profession for over a year now, not for one of our hospice clients struggling to live. And like them I know that some days are long and hard. But again and again I have experienced that the places of greatest suffering are often where God's Spirit is most powerfully present.

Which brings us to Mary's song, the Magnificat, words I have known since childhood:

Luke 1:46-56

46 And Mary said,

'My soul magnifies the Lord,

47 and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour,

48 for he has looked with favour on the lowliness of his servant.

Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed;

49 for the Mighty One has done great things for me,

and holy is his name.

50 His mercy is for those who fear him

from generation to generation.

51 He has shown strength with his arm;

he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.

52 He has brought down the powerful from their thrones,

and lifted up the lowly;

53 he has filled the hungry with good things,

and sent the rich away empty.

54 He has helped his servant Israel,

in remembrance of his mercy,

55 according to the promise he made to our ancestors,

to Abraham and to his descendants for ever.'

This song of Mary, ancient words put into the mouth of a young girl in desperately unequal Palestine in the first century CE, continue to be a cry of hope for all.

'This is the song of a person who was prepared to 'let go and let God', as the saying goes. But it was also a song for the revolution, for liberation, for radical change and the coming of God's upside down Kingdom. It announced great good news, but news which would be confronting for some. Unless they changed.' Millar

The Magnificat boldly summarizes what the entire New Testament promises is God's intent: to reverse the way humanity wrongly acts out power.

Pregnant Mary headed for the hills, on her own, maybe for the first time in her life, compelled to act out of her own strength.

She is met strongly by her also surprisingly pregnant older cousin, Elizabeth. Their greeting resonates in the unborn John the Baptist, who, 'leaps in Elizabeth's womb'.

Elizabeth first declares Mary blessed, before going on to speak of her child. Mary is blessed because she will bear the child and because she has been willing to participate in the divine initiative.

'The Magnificat, Mary's song, gives voice to her blessedness and at the same time reconnects the personal events to the wider vision which will challenge the rulers of this world. Note the connections as we move through the song: personal joy (47), personal call and blessedness (48), personal divine encounter with the holy one (49), divine compassion for all who fear God (50), divine transformation on a wider front, deposing the powers and lifting the fallen (51-55). The context of the story is the vision of change and transformation'. (Loader)

<http://wwwstaff.murdoch.edu.au/~loader/MtAdvent3.htm>

Jesus and John have met, but the focus here is on their mothers, and the words Luke puts in Mary's mouth, the words of the Magnificat, strangely reminiscent of Hanna's song from their tradition.

Seasons of the Spirit:

'For the Christian tradition, the Magnificat (which takes its name from the first word of the Latin text) is the great New Testament praise song of liberation. With elegant power and directness, Mary preaches as the prophet of the poor.

Most importantly, the Magnificat is revolutionary, with a long history of being banned by various church or political bodies. As recently as the 1980s, the government of Guatemala forbade public reading of it, as did the government of Argentina in the 1970s. With unmistakable conflict and victory, verses 52 and 53 say it all: up come the poor and vulnerable, down come the rich and powerful.

The Feast of Fools, scantily recorded and barely tolerated by the European church hierarchy, enacted the Magnificat, showing a world turned upside down. In 1199, Bishop Eudes de Sully decreed that verse 52 may not be read more than 5 times (since this was the controversial verse); We should say it six times to honour the Christian vision of toppled hierarchy and God's promise to lift up the downtrodden!'

How did you experience our mini-rendition of the Feast of Fools? What did it bring to mind? How about the Emperor's New Clothes? Or some other story or myth? Who speaks the truth?

'Franciscan Richard Rohr notes the Magnificat is an elegant example of Jesus' teachings about the obstacles to the coming reign of God.

Rohr calls these impediments the three "p's":

power, prestige, and possessions.' Seasons of the Spirit.

Think about these for a moment, power, prestige, and possessions. Where do you fit? How do your power, prestige, and possessions, affect your relationship with God and others? How do you use your power, prestige, and possessions?

Mary sings to seeing how "the proud," "the powerful," and "the rich" will be "scattered...brought down...sent away empty."

Is this good news or bad news for you? What needs to change in your world?

In addition to proclaiming a core (if difficult) truth of the Christian witness, Mary models a trusting discipleship that surrenders utterly to God's claim on her life.

'Let go and let God', is something about being totally engaged in the present moment, while at the same time, 'letting go'. That's what Mary models.

'I know that if I am unable to let go in tender love, with an unpredictable, open-ended vulnerability, I am unable to discover fresh vision. That's why I went on Sarah Bachelard's Quiet day, 'Preparing for Christmas'. In a real sense, if I am unable to let go, I am unable to engage in the struggle and to question the prevailing assumptions of society..... (Millar)

Elizabeth declares Mary blessed ([1:42](#)). All generations will call her blessed ([1:48](#)). Today's reading is an invitation to let it happen. Let her be a bearer of the Christ in her full Mary-ness.

To let you be a God bearer in your full Nikolainess, Sarahness, Phylness, John ness...

Peter Millar asks:

'And so is it possible, in these frenetic times, once again to embark on the journey of surrender - the surrendering of our souls to the one who created us and makes us whole, the healer of the nations; to sit quietly with the great biblical passages which connect Advent and Christmas, perhaps to read Mary's song of praise slowly each day, followed by some time of deep quiet; to move more deeply into the mystery of Christ's presence with us, not as an exercise in piety but as a way of restoring laughter, tender love and risk-taking into our engaged Christianity; to examine again our own prejudices, fear and shattered hopes; to hold these uncertain times in our hearts, but not feel powerless; to weep, but also to leap with joy; to hear again the voice of Isaiah and other prophets, and to walk with their words?

He continues:

'When I was in Jerusalem in May I asked Mordechai Vanunu what had kept him going through his long years of solitary confinement in an Israeli jail. He quietly replied that Christ had given him the strength each day. I understood' Miller said. 'For I also believe, along with many others, in a God who is present on Earth and who is active within human history.

And that God, tenderly, entered our human condition in a particular way at the back of a Bethlehem inn two thousand years ago. Knowing that, we can welcome Christmas morning with both laughter and tears, as a people of love - prepared to let go and let God transform us again.' p190-191
Candles and Conifers, Ruth Burgess.

Susanna Pain

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