

Micah 5:2-5

2 “But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, though you are small among the clans of Judah, out of you will come for me one who will be ruler over Israel, whose origins are from of old, from ancient times.”

3 Therefore Israel will be abandoned until the time when she who is in labour bears a son, and the rest of his brothers return to join the Israelites.

4 He will stand and shepherd his flock in the strength of the Lord, in the majesty of the name of the Lord his God. And they will live securely, for then his greatness will reach to the ends of the earth.

5 And he will be our peace when the Assyrians invade our land and march through our fortresses. We will raise against them seven shepherds, even eight commanders,

Luke 1:46-55

46 And Mary said: ‘My soul glorifies the Lord

47 and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour,

48 for he has been mindful of the humble state of his servant.

From now on all generations will call me blessed,

49 for the Mighty One has done great things for me – holy is his name.

50 His mercy extends to those who fear him,
from generation to generation.

51 He has performed mighty deeds with his arm;

he has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts.

52 He has brought down rulers from their thrones

but has lifted up the humble.

53 He has filled the hungry with good things

but has sent the rich away empty.

54 He has helped his servant Israel,

remembering to be merciful

55 to Abraham and his descendants for ever,

just as he promised our ancestors.’

Mary’s song

Luke 1:46-55

This, I’m sure you will know, is the song known as the Magnificat, and it’s been interpreted in many different ways. As prayers, as chants, as liturgy or hymns and set to music by everyone from Vivaldi to Vaughan Williams, Bruckner to Bach.

This famous declaration by Jesus’ mother Mary is part of a meeting with her relative, thought to be her cousin, Elizabeth, who’s the wife of the priest Zechariah. Whether or not they were cousins, they were related, but the more significant thing is the age difference. We’re told that Elizabeth, who was 6 months pregnant with John at this point, was ‘well on in years’. So her own baby was a miracle to say the least. Mary, in sharp contrast, was young, in fact very likely a teenager, (this is an anachronism of course, as teenagers weren’t invented until the 1940s, and children matured much quicker not having to be moody and difficult for 5 years!). So the fact that Elizabeth could easily have been Mary’s grandmother changes the image we might have of this encounter as one between two young mothers, because that’s not the situation at all. Elizabeth, the much older woman, declares Mary to be “*Blessed among women, and blessed is the child you will bear!*”. This is a foreshadowing of the relationship of John and Jesus as adults where the older man John acknowledges the younger man Jesus as far greater than he will ever be.

It's natural for us to wonder what Mary made of all this, particularly what she imagined Jesus' life would be like, if she understood as she seems to, that he was the promised Messiah. It was widely expected that the Messiah would be some sort of political figure who would set Israel free from its oppressors. Even the disciples, after the resurrection, were still thinking like this.

We sometimes gloss over well known passages like this because we think we know them. Time after time when I come to preach I find that the text either says something different to what I thought, or that God says something different to what he said last time. But this is the first time I've preached on the Magnificat, and of course it's very relevant to us today. Elizabeth honours Mary for her faith that God had kept his promises. And Mary replies '*My soul glorifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour, for he has been mindful of the humble state of his servant*'. So she clearly has a strong faith, but she moves rapidly on to say that God has chosen someone from a very ordinary background. This would have seemed strange if he was to be a King of some sort. We see all this with hindsight which Mary did not have, but for her it must have been confusing - why her, of all people? *All people will call me blessed*. Well that was certainly true.

The rest of Mary's song can truly be said to be revolutionary in its implications because as we now know Jesus did not do what anyone expected, and by the same token God has a much better plan for us than anyone might have hoped for.

The choice of Mary to have her baby as a homeless mother and to then become a refugee, a migrant, no less, signalled that God was very different to what his people had been led to believe by the religious leaders of the time. *His mercy extends to those who fear him*. This seems to omit those who don't. *He has scattered those who are proud. He has brought down rulers from their thrones. The rich he has sent empty away*. This is prophecy and not just past tense. And so the world we now see, of rulers who reject goodness, is on very shaky ground and vulnerable to its own waywardness. As Isaiah said: *Woe to those who call evil good and good evil, who put darkness for light and light for darkness, who put bitter for sweet and sweet for bitter*. 5:20

God does not have to act, they are their own worst enemies. And of course we know what became of Rome.

Luke Craddock in his commentary on Luke says this:

[In] the final judgement of God there is a complete reversal of fortunes: the powerful and rich will exchange places with the powerless and poor. And this... reversal has already begun.

God's choice of Mary is evidence of it.

Hear again this word of hope: *He has lifted up the humble. He has filled the hungry with good things*. The picture we have is of the Kingdom of God which will be victorious. Because as I said last week, quoting the vicar, is that victory looks like a man on a cross. Or in fact a risen Christ. We are all called to follow him, and we will know God's justice, mercy and peace. Amen.