

Year B Advent 4 24th December 2023

2 Samuel 7: 1-11 & 16

Luke 1: 46-55

Romans 16: 25-27

Luke 1: 26-38

Mary, Mother of God

We don't often mention Mary, the mother of God, Theotokos, maybe we leave it to our friends in the Roman Catholic tradition to revere her and invoke her name.

The prayer most commonly called 'The Hail Mary' after its opening line is:

Hail Mary, full of grace,
The Lord is with thee.
Blessed art thou amongst women,
And blessed is the fruit of thy womb, Jesus.
Holy Mary, Mother of God,
Pray for us sinners,
Now and at the hour of our death. Amen.

The Hail Mary is a prayer of praise for and of petition to Mary and it concludes with a request for Mary to intercede with God on our behalf during our life and at the time of our death.

The Angelus, which is the Hail Mary, but with some preparatory words and a prayer after it, is regularly said in RC churches and in quite a few High Anglican churches, including a few Scottish Episcopal Churches at the conclusion of the main Sunday morning communion service.

And if you visit Ireland and watch the main TV station, RTE1, at 6pm every night the Angelus bell is rung, and the Angelus is said before the early evening news. It may feel anachronistic to some, but a public consultation about 8 years ago in Ireland indicated it was still greatly valued.

And of course, we quite often hear the Hail Mary, but sung in Latin, as the 'Ave Maria'. Music can have a significant impact on us in a way that words often can't.

Ave Maria, gratia plena,
Dominus tecum.
Benedicta tu in mulieribus,
et benedictus fructus ventris tui, Iesus.
Sancta Maria, Mater Dei,
ora pro nobis peccatoribus,
nunc et in hora mortis nostrae. Amen.

The words of the Hail Mary/Ave Maria are based on texts in Luke's Gospel; the Angel's visitation to Mary (the Annunciation) and Mary's subsequent visit to Elizabeth, the mother of John the Baptist.

Our Gospel reading focuses on her obedience to God's call to carry the Christ-child and her utter and unconditional faith in God. However, I want to look at the Magnificat this morning. It is in the Lectionary to be read instead of a psalm on this Sunday. This canticle contains words Luke attributes to Mary; Mary who was a teenage soon-to-be mother, Mary speaking words that make her a prophet. Mary's song comprises the most words said by a woman in the New Testament. She says these words on the threshold of her cousin Elizabeth's house. The words echo with the words and stories spoken by women embedded in Hebrew Scripture: Miriam, Hannah, Judith and Deborah.

When we listen to the words carefully, we should note two things, at least. One is that it is a song filled with joy and hope. And the second is that it is really quite subversive. It includes words of God's justice because in the way of the holy mystery, this young teenager grasped God's intentions and actions for the coming of Emmanuel. It is subversive in its assertions about God's mercy and his deeds of lifting up the humble, the oppressed, and the hungry, at the cost of the comforts of the proud, the rulers and the rich.

Those opening lines of the Magnificat, "My soul magnifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour..." show us that Mary responded with joy to God's presence in her life. She has no sense of obligation, nor fear, nor guilt. We know that the baby in Elizabeth's womb leapt with joy when Mary arrived. And joy is at the centre of the Christmas story, and we are all invited into that time of joy, not just at Christmas, but throughout our journey of faith following the way of Jesus. Mary's faith was such, that despite her lowly and precarious status as a teenage peasant girl, she was joyful. She was unmarried, uncertain

her husband-to-be would stick with her, and yet she was joyful. In her culture she could easily have been stoned to death for being pregnant out of wedlock, and yet she was joyful. What faith in God she showed.

Mary goes on to note that despite her humble status, God has called her and she knows that future generations will honour her. She knows God is gazing lovingly on her. She can sense God's pleasure with her. How wonderful is that! God appreciates her for who she is. It has nothing to do with intellect, riches, status nor power. This is radical stuff. A poor unmarried mother confidently asserting that she is favoured by God. Confidently asserting her love of God and God's love for her. Not exactly something a timid, meek teenager would consider saying.

I wonder, do we ever allow ourselves to even consider that God looks upon us with the same favour and love as he did with Mary? That God loves us for exactly who we are?

Then Mary's song takes a swift left turn. "He has scattered the proud... He has brought down rulers... lifted up the humble, filled the hungry, sent the rich away empty" These are prophetic words of hope and joy for the unforgotten, the world's poorest, oppressed, hungry and suffering ones. She describes the unjust and sinful power structures which must be overthrown; a world re-ordered to match the ideals of God's kingdom, a kingdom of love and justice; a kingdom of God which only the vulnerable babe developing in her womb can bring into being.

Perhaps it is no surprise that over the centuries the Magnificat has been banned. It was banned from being sung in British ruled India. It was banned from public singing in Argentina during the time of the military junta (1976-83) when mothers of the disappeared bravely protested in public and used the words of the Magnificat in their public posters in the Plaza de Mayo in Buenos Aires. Clearly its message of hope and overturning unjust rulers was too much for some regimes.

And it is worth noting that Mary's song doesn't say these things will happen, but that God has done these things. Barbara Brown Taylor, one of my favourite authors, writes,

"Prophets almost never get their verb tenses straight, because part of their gift is being able to see the world as God sees it — not divided into things that are already over and things that

have not happened yet, but as an eternally unfolding mystery that surprises everyone, maybe even God."

Mary's use of the tenses challenges us. How can we live as if the world she describes is already here? What challenges would we face in doing so?

The Magnificat is a song of joy and hope. May we not just hope but also act with joy in being part of God's kingdom, here, at this time.