

Advent 4C, 2009

Text : The Magnificat (Luke 1:46-55)

Living the Magnificat

Story: Guatemala, 1980's

How many of us remember the violence and guerrilla warfare in Guatemala? 1960's, 70's, 80's: thirty six years in all, of state-sanctioned cruelty, rebel insurgency, disappearances of masses of people, genocide and pretty much all-out carnage. Most likely, for most of us, Guatemala was a long way away, an obscure South American dictatorship; even with a small influx of refugees, our lives were probably mostly untouched.

And in the 80s, in the midst of the revolution there, the government outlawed the public recitation of the Magnificat –Mary's Song that we sang this morning. Imagine that, in a country that at the time was about 80 percent Roman Catholic: a church that included the Magnificat as a pivotal part of its daily offices, as we do in the Anglican Church. The Catholic Church posed a threat to the government's totalitarianism: the Church had prioritised its work with the excluded, the poor and the under-privileged, and was promoting a more just and equitable society. In May, 1982, the conference of Catholic Bishops confronted the Guatemalan Presidency, calling on it to cease its oppressive regime. The church was, in effect, living the Magnificat. From the dictatorship's perspective, Catholics were thus considered to be allies of the guerrillas and enemies of the State, subject to persecution, death or expulsion. And that government found Mary's Song so subversive, so dangerous, that they banned it. They found something so radical and so powerful in the way that the people were responding to it, that they were scared of it.

The Magnificat: God's Great Reversal

Many commentators have labelled the Magnificat as "revolutionary", also as the theme song of God's Great Reversal, and it's also referred to as "God about to turn the world right-side up". Is that how we experience it? Is there the same power in it for us, that so inspired the masses and so threatened the government of Guatemala?

Mary's Song and the danger seen in it by despotic rulers becomes clear when we look at it in the context of Mary's world. There are two main things to focus on: the content of the song, and the singer, that is, Mary herself and what she and her circumstances symbolise and tell us about the work God is about to do in Jesus and in this world.

Just look at what she's saying –bringing down the mighty from their thrones, sending the rich away empty! In a Roman occupied country where the political powers and authorities bore down heavily on anyone who dared challenge or cross them, this was inflammatory; revolutionary.

Mary lived in a world dominated by Roman rule and by a king – Herod – whose control was absolute and cruel, and under whom the ordinary people of village and field had become disempowered and poor. But not only is Mary part of a politically downtrodden people, she's also part of a culture dominated by honour and shame,

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and by rules of status and hierarchy. She's a woman and young –probably about 14 years old – and not from a family worth naming. And she's unmarried and mysteriously pregnant. That places her amongst the ranks of the dishonourable, a girl responsible for bringing her family and even village into disrepute and social shame. She's really on the margins.

So into this culture and political environment, in the voice of someone on the edge of acceptable society, near the bottom of the community pecking order, the Gospel writer Luke gives Mary the words of the Magnificat: “a prayer made from the position of the downtrodden and the poor who praise God for his might, his mercy and his continued concern.[praising] God for his attributes of holiness, mercy, strength, care and remembrance of promises –not just a giver of promises but a keeper of promises. Mary sings a prayer of the poor of God who rejoice that littleness has been blessed. In that sense it is a hymn of a Cinderella people: the proud are toppled from their precious pedestals; the mighty find themselves unemployed; the little people are unimportant no more; the hungry are attended to at last; the rich are awarded nothing. The Magnificat celebrates the wisdom of reversal and praises the revolution of God – what he has achieved in establishing a kingdom where the forgotten and lowly are held precious in the sight of God”.

And.... “it is equally clear about God's attitude to those who are involved in oppression: they are scattered, put down, sent empty away. ...This is a God who is actively involved in liberating his people from the powers that oppress them. The prayer speaks of a God who has unambiguous positions on religious, social and economic matters: quoting from Father Isidro Goma Civit, ‘The cry of all the humble and oppressed, of all time and of the present, is recognised in the Mary of the Gospel’¹ - the peasant girl, a nobody in a status-ridden world, with a pregnancy verging on the shameful. Regardless of the words of the Magnificat, what speaks louder is the fact that this song, and the responsibility of bearing God's Son, is given to Mary. The lowly are indeed lifted up!

Magnificat: Fleeting hope or lived reality?

There's a question here that readily arises for me, and I know some of you expressed the same question in our Advent study group: if Christ has brought about such a revolution, how come we still have a world that struggles with oppression and injustice and poverty? Was Mary's song of justice just a fleeting hope, or is it more than that?

To begin to grapple with that takes us beyond the message and the words, to the God who elevates and honours the downtrodden. The Christian faith is not one that is just about taking the written word of Scripture and putting it into action. We certainly are called to do that; and that is powerful in itself, as the Guatemalan regime feared and discovered. But the real potency of the Magnificat is that God chose a very ordinary, lowly born girl as a *living sign* of God's revolution and revelation, a living sign of his Great Reversal. God just hasn't given us words and teaching in this birth story of Jesus. He's actually launched his plan of liberation in a way that is entirely consistent with his message. He didn't send a politically and socially powerful warrior to fight on behalf of the low and hungry and so secure their freedom and salvation. He chose

¹ Denis MacBride, *Where does the Jesus Story Begin?*, Redemptionist Publications, UK, 2006, p.101,102.

obscurity and dishonour through which to enter the world. And in doing this, God has completely turned the values of the world – then and now- upside down. With his coming the great reversal, the revolution is underway. It's begun -not yet complete – the world and even God's people, are not yet fully reflecting and living out the Magnificat image of justice and mercy. But in Christ, child of Mary, God has broken through the hold of evil in the world, implanting love and grace, offering in Christ's life, death and resurrection, through God's Spirit, the means by which his kingdom will fully come.

The Challenge

In this, the world will never be the same. Christ has shown the way to the subversion of the ordered power structures of this world. He calls for God's people to participate in the revolution- feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, healing the sick, naming injustice. We are told in scripture that we are the body of Christ. As the church, God is using us to work his will in this world. We are God's hands, feet and voice. We, like Mary in her day, are called as the people of God to bring justice to the world around us. It's an overwhelming job that God's given us. But he's given us the resources to do so. We are told that he has given us his Holy Spirit to empower us and to move us forward in our faith.

In our country at this time the Magnificat may not inspire us to the sort of revolution that overthrows governments , as in Guatemala's experience. But can you still hear the call in it, to us who are the privileged of the world? Like Mary, who embodied the message of God's revolution in Christ, are you willing to participate in God's subversion, in his great reversal of power and do what you can do to bring justice to the world, in song, in word or in deed? Can you trust yourselves to God's empowering, to his Spirit of wisdom, that you may discern injustice and have the courage to act?

God is ready to birth his revolutionary kingdom of justice and grace through us, as he did through Mary. Amen.