

“The Magnificat: A Song of Triumph”

(Luke 1.46-55)

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Our Image of Mary

Think of Mary, mother of Jesus, and it’s likely that one of two images will spring to mind...

One is the picture of *compliant humility*, favoured by Martin Luther at the Reformation... the serene young woman, surrendering herself to God’s will as announced by the angel Gabriel. The other favourite is Mary as the *suffering mother*... more common in traditional Roman Catholic ‘iconography’. It has its roots in that chilling prophecy of Simeon, holding the young baby Jesus in the Temple, and looking at Mary and saying, “...and a sword will pierce your soul too” (Luke 2.35b)... This image is famously captured in art by the *Pieta* – a mother consumed in grief, nursing the limp body of her executed son.

But neither of these images – worthy as they *both* are – provide a helpful doorway into *today’s* gospel (Luke 1.46-55)... *The Magnificat*... Mary’s song of praise... when in her pregnancy, she visits cousin Elizabeth in the hill country of Judea. (1.39)

The Magnificat is one of *those* texts... so well known to us that it’s become wall-paper in our faith. So this morning, let’s look again.

Looking Again

It’s really helpful if we remember the Hebrew Scripture upon which the *Magnificat* is modelled... that is *Hannah’s Song* in the first Book of Samuel. (2.1-10) Do you remember the story? Hannah is married to a man with two wives... as was accepted custom in early Israel. Hannah is the senior and the ‘loved’ wife... but *she* is barren... childless. And she’s cruelly mocked and ridiculed... humiliated over many years... by her younger, fertile, child-laden rival. (1.6) But then the miracle happens – she conceives Samuel – and Scripture records Hannah singing in unbridled triumph...

*“My heart exults in the Lord;
my strength/fertility is exalted in my God. (I’m walking on air!)*

*And I gloat over my enemies
because I rejoice in my victory.” (2.1)*

And now quickly, before old prejudices settle back, go straight to *Mary’s Song*,
*“My soul magnifies the Lord,
and my spirit rejoices in God my saviour,
For he has looked with favour on the lowliness of his servant.
Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed.” (Luke 1.46-48)*

Can you hear it? Not a trace of suffering *or* serene humility here. This is a woman crowing in triumph! She’s the winner... and it’s fabulous!

The Magnificat (Luke 1.46-55)

The Magnificat is the victory song of a peasant woman, a lowly member of an oppressed people... rejoicing, because in her womb grows the act of God, through which the whole world order will be turned upside down. In this conception,

*“He (God) has shown strength with his arm;
he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.
He has brought down the powerful from their thrones,
and lifted up the lowly;
he has filled the hungry with good things,
and sent the rich away empty. (51-53)*

Not only has God noticed her, a little nobody from Nazareth, (48-9) he has noticed the nation of Israel, (54) and indeed, all the poor of the world. In this child she carries, God will show the emperors where *true* authority and power resides. From this moment on, the proud are being humbled, the powerful are turfed-off their thrones, while the lowly are being lifted up and filled with all manner of good things. From this day on, it is not power, wealth and violence that rules. It’s mercy! (50)

Note that Mary’s triumph is not in her own strength or achievement – rather, it is in what God is doing in her life... and in the world.

The Poem

Some years back I came across this poem by an Australian poet, Noel Rowe... The poet imagines an older Mary, reflecting back over her life... speaking to Simeon (the old man who prophesied the breaking of her heart when Jesus was born.)

The Structure of the Real

*Yes, Simeon, there was sorrow, but much fun
too, when he set about making contradiction.*

*I should have known: for when the glories first were sung,
it was to celebrate my son, born among the dung.*

*Ever since, I've been hearing heaven's laughter.
Cana's newly-weds, absorbed in what was coming after,*

*did not even notice how the water changed its mind.
The Pharisees got a holy shock as a man born blind*

*told them if they didn't get a hold on their desires,
so taken up with Christ, they'd land themselves among his followers.*

*Sacred irreverence. It is a gift to those found free
in the spirit. Even Zaccheus found it in himself, up a tree,*

and Lazarus, sauntering around in his shroud.

There was a time, too, when expecting stones, a crowd

*got instead some bread and fish. I heard a thief steal
his way back to paradise. The structure of the real*

*is mercy. Having seen so many reversals,
I should have known he would test his muscles*

*on the stone, and walk away from the dazed
grave, leaving its mouth open and amazed.*

Mary replies to Simeon's prophecy of pain, and says, *'Yes, of course it was painful, but that's not what you'd want to become focused on. I see more the fun of it, the outrageous contradiction, the freedom, the new life. You **could** just remember the sorrow, by why would you do that... when there was so very much more!'*

This is what we see in the Magnificat. Mary could quite reasonably sit down with Elizabeth and have a good old whinge... 'Oh it's such a nightmare! I barely touched the man and now I'm 4 months pregnant! And now he's saying it's not his child, and the whole betrothal's under a cloud, my parents are furious, no-one will talk to me and there's even gossip at the synagogue about having me stoned! And my feet are swelling something shocking.' Maybe that's too flippant... but in Mary's situation there is a lot she could choose to worry about.

Instead, Mary looks at the movement of God, and in place of anxiety... sees triumph. That's the point of the *Magnificat*... *'Look what God is doing...He's turning everything upside down and it's fantastic.'* Instead of focusing on her anxiety, Mary looks at the movement of God and it's exciting.

Conclusion

What is Mary saying to us from the pages of Luke's Gospel today? She's asking us to look at our temptation to anxiety and despair... and challenge it. She's asking us to look, not at our selves and our worries, but to focus on the action of God instead. To look for the movement of God's Spirit in our lives, in our world and in our church, and to rejoice in that. To travel lighter through life... rather than struggling through as if we carry the world on our shoulders... because God is in charge and God's reality will prevail.

We are persistently tempted to fear and despair. But I hear Mary's voice loud and clear today. *'Don't focus on worry and anxiety. Instead, look at what God is doing... and get excited. God is turning everything upside down, and life abundant is flowing from his mercy.'*