

Sermon 19 December 2021

Luke 1:39-53

This Gospel passage gave rise to one of the great hymns of our Church, the Magnificat. The messages are quite revolutionary, but first a little background.

Mary, pregnant with Jesus, has paid a visit to her cousin, Elizabeth, who is also pregnant, her baby being the future John the Baptist. When Mary greets Elizabeth, Elizabeth's baby stirs. *'When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leapt in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit.'* And then Elizabeth says something very interesting, *Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me?' So she knew! How did she know? Well, she was married to Zechariah, a Jewish priest, and he was told by an angel that despite their advanced age, Elizabeth would bear him a child, and this child would be special. 'The angel said, "Don't be afraid, Zechariah! For God has heard your prayer, and your wife, Elizabeth, will bear a son! And you are to name him John. He will precede the coming of the Lord, preparing the people for his arrival.'* Luke 1:13.

So Elizabeth knew exactly what was happening when she told Mary that she was blessed. Mary's response was what has become known as the Magnificat. The message contained in her response is quite revolutionary. *'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.'* This is turning society's order on its head. Bringing down the powerful a few notches and lifting up the humble. And as we know, it is a theme that Jesus raised often.

It is actually a vision that Mary is setting forth, a vision of what a good society looks like. So what does this vision of Mary's consist of? What does this good society look like?

What she is really talking about is the coming of God's kingdom. God's kingdom is a society where everyone looks after and cares for one another. There are no injustices; there is equality in that all are treated as equals – everyone's rights are respected. Yes, there will be leaders, because leaders provide direction and motivation. Yes, there will be wealth, but that wealth will be used to benefit the needy – that is what is meant by equality.

It frustrates me hugely that this is what Jesus is all about, and yet he is rejected or ignored by the majority of the population. If only people could understand that by forming a meaningful relationship with Jesus Christ, not only can it help on a personal level, but it surely must help towards the making of a better society. Look at what we are faced with right now, and I am not talking about COVID 19, but rather the violence, both in our society and in our homes, inequality between rich and poor, abuse of power. It is so ironic that as figures show more and more people turning away from religion, society needs the presence and influence of Jesus Christ more than ever.

Anyway, getting back to Mary. Mary has a special place in our religion as the mother of Jesus, and quite rightly so. However, we have here her vision of what a good society looks like. We have here her vision of the kingdom of God, and quite frankly I don't think she is given due credit for this. It's understandable that at the time she wasn't given credit because she was a woman, and women's views were not really taken all that seriously back then. But even today I don't think nearly enough credit is given to Mary for what was a revolutionary discernment of what God's kingdom should be like, a foresight of what a good society is – a society where we all live in harmony with each other, with our environment and with ourselves. And hopefully, a society centered on the figure of Jesus Christ.

I want to finish by saying that we need people with vision. Vision gives rise to direction and to goals. I have said it before and I will say it again, I applaud those who had a vision of a new church here at St Paul's many years ago. Our role is to ensure that vision becomes a reality. Let me share a story with you.

An old Indian chief was dying. He summoned his three sons to his bedside and told them that one of them would succeed him to lead the tribe. He told them to climb the Holy Mountain and bring back a gift. The one who brought back the most outstanding gift would become the leader.

The three sons set off to the top of the mountain. The first brought back a beautiful flower, vivid, dazzling colours. The second son brought back an amazing stone, smoothed by years of wind and rain, reflecting the colours of the forest and the mountain.

The third son returned empty-handed. He said, 'Father, when I reached the top of the Holy Mountain, I looked out over the other side and saw a beautiful land, lush, green pastures and a lake with clear, blue water. I had a vision of where our tribe could go for a better life. I was so overwhelmed by what I saw that I returned with nothing.'

The father replied, 'You shall be our tribe's leader, for you have brought back the most precious gift of all – the gift of a vision for a better future.'

Mary has given us a vision. It is our role to see if that vision can be fulfilled here in Flat Bush. Let's begin by embracing the celebration of the coming of Christ amongst us; better still, by embracing Christ himself.

Reverend Warner Wilder