

Sermon 15 December 2024

Philippians 2:1-5 Luke 1:39-53

This Gospel passage gave rise to one of the great hymns of our Church, the Magnificat, and also that wonderful hymn, 'Tell out my soul', which paraphrases the Magnificat and which we will be singing soon. The messages in this passage 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.'* Luke 1:41. 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.'* Luke 52-53. 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 Jesus raised often.

It is actually a vision 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 simply 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 either ignored or rejected by the majority of the population. If only people could understand that by forming a meaningful relationship with 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 – violence, both in our society and in the home, inequality between rich and poor, abuse of power, widespread divisiveness. 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 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 centred on the figure of Christ.

I quote from our first reading: *'Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. You must have the same attitude that Christ Jesus had.'* Philippians 2:4-5. This has to be our attitude, our vision as we move forward with our new church and community centre.

Speaking of vision, next Sunday Dale will be sharing with us his vision of the role of the new community centre in our ministry to the community. I will be surprised if there are not distinct similarities to Mary's vision.

I want to finish by coming back to the theme and purpose of Advent – the preparation and looking forward to the celebration of the coming of Jesus. The celebrations themselves are naturally a time of joy, but what is more important is that the reason for these celebrations should be about the bringing of a beacon of hope and joy into the darkness of our world. This is illustrated very well in a novel called 'The Apostle' written by Randy Alcorn.

The novel is based on the life and ministry of the Apostle Paul. A striking scene takes place towards the end of the novel. Hundreds of Christians are condemned to death for their faith. They are lowered into a dark dungeon through a tiny trapdoor. They will not see the light of day again until they are hauled back up through the trapdoor and taken to the arena to be destroyed by wild beasts for the amusement of Roman spectators. Meanwhile they wait in darkness.

The atmosphere in the dungeon is one of profound sadness. Everyone in it is doomed to die a terrible death. Suddenly, the trapdoor opens. A shaft of sunlight pierces the darkness. The prisoners grow deathly silent. As they do, they can't believe what they see and hear.

A new prisoner is being lowered into the dungeon to await death with them. But, unlike them, he is not sad. He is singing and praising God at the top of his voice. 'Who is this man?' everyone asks. Then the word spreads like wildfire. The new prisoner is Paul the Apostle.

Paul's joy and happiness are so contagious that everyone in the dungeon begins to join him in singing and praising God. In a matter of seconds, the coming and presence of Paul transforms the dungeon from a place of sadness and despair into a place of joy and hope.

This is a novel but it is based on a true life. Now, what enabled the character of Paul to bring a ray of sunshine into that dungeon? It was his faith, purely and simply. No doubt we will not find ourselves in such a dire predicament as those Christians in that dungeon, but we all find ourselves confronted at times with challenges that weigh us down, and even on occasions feel insurmountable. So we draw on our faith. We look to God, to Christ for that strength that will bring a sense of peace and hope. That is what we celebrate at Christmas. It is a sense of joy of anticipating the day when we will discover for ourselves what Paul describes so beautifully in 1 Corinthians 2:9: *'No eye has seen, no ear has heard, and no mind has imagined what God has prepared for those who love him.'*

The last word goes to Martin Luther, German priest and theologian, who wrote, *'But if you possess faith, your heart cannot do otherwise than laugh for joy in God, and grow free, confident and courageous.'*