

MY SOUL MAGNIFIES THE LORD

Micah 5. 2-5a
 Hebrews 10. 5-10
 Luke 1. 39-55

I speak to you in the name of † the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.
 Amen.

There are some bits of music, aren't there, that have become so familiar to us that we cannot get them out of our heads. Sometimes, we may not even remember how or when we heard a particular piece of music in the first place. But the music is so engraved in our minds that it does not leave us. Perhaps even now as I speak, you are thinking of a particular tune or melody that is one of your favourites, one that you cherish; one that you 'play' in your mind often. What is it for you?

If you and I had been living in first-century Judea, many of the words from Mary's song would have sounded very, very familiar to our ears. Her *Magnificat*¹ (from the Latin word meaning to 'magnify' or to 'glorify') would surely have made us think of another, very well-known song: the song of Hannah, which she sang upon becoming the mother of Samuel after years of barrenness. Hannah's prayerful song is recorded in the second chapter of the first book of Samuel (2. 1-10).

Like Mary's song, Hannah's song is a psalm of praise; it begins, 'My heart exults in the Lord; my strength is exalted in my God.' And like Mary, Hannah praises the Lord as Saviour and acknowledges him as holy. Both women go on to announce how the mighty and rich will be cast down, whereas the lowly and the poor will be raised up. Those who have their fill will come away empty, while the hungry will hunger no more. These parallels demonstrate that Mary views herself as standing in the tradition of women like Hannah, whom God has raised up from their afflictions.

¹ The Latin word is found in the first line of Mary's song in the Vulgate version of the Bible.

Like Hannah, Mary has conceived a child through the miraculous intervention of God in her life. Like Hannah, Mary will dedicate her Son in the temple.² Like Hannah, Mary responds with a song of praise and thanksgiving for the providential child she has been given. Hannah's song culminates with the announcement of the future coming of a king (2. 10). Mary's song, on the other hand, rejoices in the fact that God has fulfilled the promise 'he made to our ancestors' of the long-awaited *Messiah*-King, whom she now carries in her womb.

In the first half of Mary's song, the camera focusses on Mary. In order to understand this part of her song, we need to remember that she is young, probably 14 or 15 years old; and there is absolutely nothing about her that commends her as being exceptional. To the contrary, Mary is a poor, humble peasant girl who has no social standing due to her parentage or class. She is a country girl from Nazareth, located in the north of Israel, which was the poorest part of the country in those days; and she is betrothed to a man who works with his hands and by the sweat of his brow.

In her song, Mary says, '...my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour, for he has looked with favour on the lowliness of his servant' (1. 48). The word in the original text that Mary uses for her lowliness³ describes not only a spiritual humility, but a condition of great suffering. In fact, this same word was used in the Old Testament to depict the affliction of God's people when they were persecuted and oppressed, but about to be rescued by God's saving hand.⁴

Considered within the social context of Roman rule in first-century Galilee, Mary's 'lowliness' would bring to mind the pains experienced by many Jews who were suffering under foreign domination at that time. As one New Testament scholar has explained, 'It is not that Mary has some personal and individual affliction; her

² Cf. Lk 2.22-24.

³ The Greek word 'tapeinosin'.

⁴ Cf. Dt 26. 7; 1 Sa 9. 16; 2 Ki 14. 26; Ps 136. 23-24.

affliction is simply that of God's people awaiting his saving intervention on their behalf.'

This prepares us to understand the second half of Mary's song, where the camera lens is pulled back so that we can see God's people as a whole – the people who have Mary as their premier member. Many announces that what God has done for her, he is about to do for all those who are 'lowly' in Israel (1. 52). God has remembered his covenant with Abraham and has come to help his people Israel (1. 54-55).

In order to understand more fully what Mary is saying in the second part of her song, it is important to note that in St Luke's gospel, the words 'rich' and 'poor' are not simply economic terms. The 'hungry' here refers not only to people in material poverty, but more broadly to all the marginalised and downtrodden in society. Throughout St Luke's gospel, in fact, the 'poor' refers to a wide range of people, including the blind, the lame, the deaf, and the lepers, as well as those burdened by socio-political injustices, such as the 'oppressed', the 'captives', the 'persecuted' and the 'hungry'. In a similar manner, the 'rich' is not simply a synonym for the economic upper class, but a social term describing those who exploit, overlook or marginalise the various 'poor' outcasts of society.

Given this background, we see that Mary is therefore announcing a series of ironic reversals in society. God in his mercy has remembered the suffering and oppressed in Israel, and will gather them into the kingdom of his Son; while the 'proud', the 'mighty' and the 'rich', who oppose God's people, are about to be cast down.

Mary's song anticipates the major components of her Son's mission. As the subsequent chapters of St Luke's gospel will show, Jesus' public ministry will embody the dramatic reversals proclaimed by the *Magnificat*, whether it be healing the sick, feeding the hungry, extending fellowship to the estranged, forgiving sinners, or

confronting the social, political and religious leaders of the day. In fact, right at the heart of our Lord's teachings about the kingdom, we find him proclaiming the same news of salvation announced in Mary's song. In the Beatitudes (as you will remember), he announces blessing upon the poor, the hungry, the persecuted and the excluded, while he announces woe to the rich – those who are comfortable, socially accepted and who have their fill.⁵ Mary's *Magnificat* finds fulfilment in Christ's public ministry.

Mary's song also anticipates the prayer of the Christian Church, which ceaselessly 'proclaims the greatness of the Lord'. What God has done for this lowly woman of Galilee, he will do for all of us through her Son. He will meet us in our own lowliness and sufferings; he will do 'great things' for us. His loving touch will be upon us. Like a representative of all the faithful, Mary stands at the gateway of the new covenant: she is the first Christian disciple to receive the amazing mercy of God in Jesus.

Our God, who has acted this way in the past, acts now. Our God is not the God of the past alone, or the God simply to be projected into the future; our God is the God of the now, and is with each of us now. His presence is a revolutionary power; his presence changes things.

Dear friends, the Lord is with *you*; and this mercy of God, available in our Lord Jesus Christ, is offered afresh to you and to me today.

Amen.

⁵ Cf. Lk 6. 20-26.