

Mary's Song
Amersham Free Church 20.12.20

Psalm 89:1-2, 15-18
Luke 1: 46-56

To talk about Mary's song on this last Advent Sunday has its pitfalls just now. Apart from the limited number of our Chancel Singers – we can not actually sing out our praises as we would like to and as Mary did in our Gospel reading for today. Mary, of course, didn't experience a Lockdown as we have (twice now!) but she was no stranger to the feelings we all had during our crisis situation due to the corona virus pandemic. It is said that beyond the dangers of catching the virus itself, the most difficult side-effect of the Lockdown was the way it influenced our mental health. Although, this is often used as a short-hand for loneliness, which plagues especially those living on their own, I think it is probably a wider issue than that. In our everyday life our identity, our self-understanding is made up of all the different affirmations, different feed-backs we receive from others in our human relationships. And the truth of the matter is that we need them all in order to have a balanced, healthy self-regard. So, even if we don't live alone, during the lockdown we all had to miss out on a number of those confidence-building face-to-face affirmations that normally keep us on an even keel.

I was reminded of this as I read about Mary, the mother of Jesus for today's service. Luke, the Gospel writer doesn't tell us anything about her before her mighty adventure starts with the long-awaited Messiah. But, in contrast to Matthew's Gospel, which presents Joseph as the central figure in the nativity, Luke has quite a lot to say about the way Mary becomes the mother of Jesus. What's more, he gives her the longest 'speaking role' any woman has in the whole of the NT. Even so, from the distance of 2000 years it is no mean task to disentangle the 1st century Jewish woman, Miriam of Nazareth from the elevated figure of the Virgin Mary, who has been offered deep love and devotion by millions of Christians down the ages. Miriam of Nazareth is quite a stranger to us, far removed from us both in time and in culture. But when we try to imagine the turmoil she must have been plunged into on hearing the startling news about her unexpected pregnancy, and especially when we listen to her song *The Magnificat*, we may find that she is in fact, "truly our sister", words used by Elizabeth Johnson as the title of her remarkable book on Mary.

Well, how did this song come about? Where did the joyful proclamation of God's gracious compassion, power and justice stem from amidst the air of suspicion and scandal that surely surrounded Mary at the time of her conception. In the Annunciation she had the affirmation and blessing of the heavenly messenger and she said 'yes' to his proposal – after all, it would have been difficult to argue with someone, like the Angel Gabriel! But that didn't seem to be enough for Mary. What did it all mean? Has it actually happened, or was it just the trick of her imagination? Could she really play such a role she had been called to? She needed human acknowledgement as well, the encouragement and confirmation of this new identity that was forming within her. Just like we all do, when some great life-changing experience hits us. She needed someone to make it real for her. So, in a decisive move, she hurries off to her relative, the aging Elizabeth. And she can't have gone to a better place. Elizabeth takes her in, nurtures her, nourishes her confidence and with a three-fold blessing affirms her calling.

The meeting of Mary and Elizabeth is a lovely, very human, very down-to-earth event. It highlights the importance of having someone we can turn to when perplexed, but it also alerts us to the responsibility we all have for each other's well being. How with our encouragement and blessing of each other, we too can become active participants of God's work in the world. It certainly had that effect on Mary, when she responded to Elizabeth with the words we've just heard in our Gospel reading. If it weren't for this mutual understanding and support of these two Spirit-filled women, we may not have had this song, which Martin

Luther saw as the model for Christian prayer and praise and Dietrich Bonhoeffer called the oldest Advent hymn ushering in the Messianic age. Not to mention the millions of poor and oppressed women all over the world, who hunger for justice and find sisterly encouragement in the words of Mary's Magnificat.

*"My soul tells out the greatness of the Lord,
my spirit has rejoiced in God my Saviour;
for he has looked with favour on his servant, lowly as she is".*

So begins Mary's song, which gives voice to her personal feelings on becoming the bearer of the Messiah and his good news. Much has been made of the words 'servant' and 'lowly', which had been understood as a kind of self-deprecating on Mary's side emphasising her submissiveness and humility. When this is used exclusively as a model for Christian behaviour for women - as unfortunately, it has been over the centuries - it can convey a distorted message of this magnificent song. For Luke the idea of servanthood is nothing less than the greatest vocation of ALL God's people, including Jesus himself, who told his male disciples at the Last Supper to seek greatness through service, for... 'I am among you like a servant'. (Luke 22:27) I'd like to think that Jesus as a boy listened to his Mum and as an adult remembered what he learnt from her.

The word 'lowly' could also be misunderstood, if we think of it merely as some kind of metaphor for Mary's spiritual humility, rather than a description of her real, actual social position. It's worth noting that the same word is used in the Hebrew Bible to describe the state of Hagar, Abraham's disgraced slave girl and the state of the oppressed Israelite tribes suffering in their Egyptian bondage. Both very real, earthly events.

Mary is young and female, subjected to all sorts of potential danger and exploitation by powerful ruling groups in an occupied country, which puts her in the category of the most, vulnerable, most disadvantaged group in her society. Yet, here she is, rejoicing in the God, who has noticed her and has shown great favour to her, thereby standing alongside all the disadvantaged people of the world and inspiring them to trust in the same God, who hears and sees and acts. She echoes the convictions of Psalm 89, and like the Psalmist, she knows that regardless of her lowly state, or even because of it, in God's faithfulness she is lifted up, and in God's favour she can hold her head high. And as she utters her exuberant praises, they take her out of her self-reflection into the wider fields of God's concern. She begins to see that her case is part of God's overall uplifting and liberating plan for everyone. There may be a lesson or two for us here: praising God is good way of taking us out our self-centered posture and, in fact, a wholesome prayer, however personal it may be, will always lead us into the wider vista of God's bigger picture.

The second half of Mary's prayer turns into a virtual political manifesto, where her earlier 'yes' to her special calling is followed by an emphatic 'no' to the status quo, in which her calling will have to be lived out. She rises into prophetic heights as she praises the God, who has chosen her and enlisted her help to further the divine plan. This God is not a respecter of accepted social norms and structures. The Kingdom of this God, is an upside down Kingdom, where the proud and privileged do not get to rule, where the high-low hierarchy is overturned, where the lowly ones, both male and female are lifted up. Where the hunger for power is rejected but the hunger of the poor is satisfied. This is the same vision that Jesus followed through his Messianic ministry and it is the same vision we have been called to follow as we tread in his footsteps.

So, let us finish our thoughts about Mary with the words of a prayer specially written to a friend:

*Holy God,
Who has come close to us in Jesus Christ,*

*we offer our thanks for his Mother Mary.
We cherish her for her willingness to accept
her first-born son as a divine gift;
for the way she nurtured him and brought him up
in your love and sacrificial service;
for the way in which we can see in her
your own motherly nature, your understanding,
your tender, unconditional love,
which embraces all our human weakness
and vulnerability and helps us
to grow into the very likeness of Christ.
May her memory be blessed forever. Amen*

Erna Stevenson