

## **The Feast of St. Mary the Virgin, August 20, 2017. The Magnificat.**

Today we are celebrating the Feast Day of St. Mary the Virgin, Jesus' mom, and our gospel text is what is normally known as the Magnificat, though the Prayer Book calls it the Song of Mary. It comes in the very first chapter of Luke. An angel comes and tells Mary that she, a virgin, will bear a child who will be the Son of God. Mary agrees that this sounds great and goes to visit her cousin Elizabeth, already pregnant with John the Baptist. After the two women greet each other, Mary bursts into this song that we have just heard.

It can be hard to hear the Magnificat with fresh ears. Many of us can only hear it through memories of forced childhood prayers. Others of us can only hear it through the echoes of childhood suspicion or general muddledness about the many beliefs that have developed around Mary. But that is our challenge this morning: to hear God speaking to us today through these ancient and well-worn words. And if we can, then we just might hear something very surprising. I've seen this happen. I remember a friend of mine who is both a professor of New Testament and an Episcopal priest leading a bible study once on the beginning of Luke. Someone in the group read this passage aloud and my friend took off his glasses and with this baffled expression that was just beginning to flirt with delight he said in a quiet voice, "Mary was a revolutionary."

My friend was right, you know. This would count as revolutionary in just about any society in human history: "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." It was revolutionary in the outskirts of the ancient Roman Empire, it was revolutionary in the United States five years ago, and it's revolutionary in our society now. And it may be worth pointing out that Mary seems not to think that the goings on in the world of power are nothing to do with our faith. Mary's revolution is a kind of leveling: God is raising up those who have been pressed down and filling the hungry, while at the same time casting down the powerful and emptying out the rich.

But that's not quite right, is it? Because Mary doesn't sing that God *is* doing these things. She sings that God *has done* these things. This is puzzling, because Caesar is still on his throne, both then and now. The poor are still hungry while the rich continue to increase their wealth. If we are trying to hear this fresh today, then I think that this might be one of the things that we hadn't noticed before: despite all appearances, Mary is so sure of God's justice that it is as if it has already come. And this is before Jesus is even born! It's challenging to us, who struggle so often with despair, to think of an assurance of justice that is so strong that we can talk about it in the past tense—or, rather, the present perfect if we are feeling pedantic. Picture yourself trying to say this week that the sins of greed and abuse of power have been overcome. And now picture what you might be able to do if you were assured that God's justice would win—if fear of failure weren't a factor. If you knew that the victory was coming and the only question was what your role in it would be.

Mary's role in the coming of God's justice might be another surprise for us. Because after this song that we could imagine coming from early Bob Dylan, peak Bob Seeger, or maybe even a somewhat odd punk band, we might expect her to go woman the barricades. But in fact, she does something very different: she gives birth to and raises a child. This is counter even to the countercultural, as Mary participates in God's assured coming justice by settling down to the long haul work of raising a child. We don't get more songs from her. Her work is short on flashpoints and crisis moments in the big struggle of creating a new world. It is long on the everyday, committed, sometimes boring, frustrating, beautiful, joyous work of training a child who will never fit in with a world dominated by the powerful.

I think this is key. Mary could have joined the radical opposition to Roman rule, the party known as the zealots, who promoted violent revolution. She could have tried to insinuate her way into the corridors of power, or raised her son to do so. She does neither. And when Jesus begins to gather followers to himself, his group includes both a zealot and a collaborating tax collector—two partisan enemies who are joined together by the power and love of Jesus Christ. Mary does not conflate God's justice with the existing machinery of partisan power. The son she raises does not subsume his movement under those in power or those trying to take power. Interacting always with the political situation of his context, he does a third thing, building a community that will not just redistribute who rules whom, but will start building a new world in which the image of God stamped on every person can flourish.

This doesn't simply teach us that if we care about God's justice we ought to have children. But it does teach us that God's justice may come slowly, organically, and have an idiosyncratic relationship to the parties who are after secular power. It may be a matter of working away in the background for thirty years until our work, like Mary's, flourishes all at once in a way that changes lives forever. It can be easy or difficult to show up at rallies, to express outrage, to post many articles to social media. And this kind of engagement with the world can be very important. But Mary models for us that it takes longer and is harder to build a new world, and that nothing less than this is participation in the justice of God.

And the final surprise from the Magnificat shows an important element of this long-range work for God's justice. That final surprise is that God's revolution is undertaken in joy. As Mary sings about the overturning of the entire way of the world, she does so from an overflowing joy. This is not to say that anger is forbidden, but that it is put in service of a restoration of the joy that flows from the assurance that God will right the world. Over the long-term, anger burns out and burns us out. But joy simmers along, and love for God's people persists when anger at social sin has been diverted into the next crisis. Let this be a lesson to us, as we do work in the world through the church and in tandem with other organizations: if joy is not somehow a part of the work, then we have probably gone wrong somehow. Not that it must always be happy and pleasant, but joy and love should be in the deep down bones of the work—the joy and love that come from God's own presence with us in the work. Amen.