

## **Luke 1:46-55 The Magnificat**

Do you sing for joy?

When your emotions have been pent up, whether it be with confusion, fear and concern, or impatience to reach a longed-for goal, and they encounter something or someone which suddenly swings your emotions into a more positive framework, how do they release themselves? Do you sing? Or is singing an emotional release in and of itself? Are there hymns or songs that have a tendency to make you especially joyful, or reduce you to tears? Or is it that sometimes you go to football stadium, or come to church, all wound up with the cares of your life, and find release in singing?

The young girl who sings the song that forms our Gospel today, had had her life turned upside down in the days immediately before she decides to hurriedly trek into the hills, to visit a cousin for a little mutually supportive break. For them, as for many women, pregnancy brings with it a raft of emotions that hormones bring rather closer to the surface than they might otherwise be. But given that both Elizabeth and Mary had conceived through the miraculous power of God's concern, not just for them, but for the whole of humanity, it was unsurprising that the pleasure they experience of encountering the evidence of each other's story is released in shouts and songs of joy.

Mary's song is known as the Magnificat, after the opening phrase "My soul magnifies (or extols) the Lord". And what strikes me, given the situation in which Mary finds herself, is how little of the song is about herself. Yes, her spirit rejoices because of the favour shown her by God, but it was a blessing that she had received with initial trepidation and some significant angst for her relationship with Joseph, so wanting to proclaim God's part in proceedings is socially significant in the first place! As a unwed teenager in a religiously-conservative community, how stunning is it that Mary finds the courage to sing, "from now on all generations will call me blessed. For you, Mighty One, have done great things for me, and holy is your name."<sup>i</sup>

Then, Mary places her pregnancy not within the context of her own short life and the changes being wrought upon it, but in the context of the history of her people and the world at large - a mercy that stretches from one generation to another, the dream of ancient Israel. God had promised that all nations would be blessed through Abraham's family. Mary was soaked in the psalms and prophecies that had carried the hope of God's mercy, revolution and victory to the era of servitude. That is why there are so many echoes of Hannah's song over another small boy in 1 Samuel 2.<sup>ii</sup> How awesome is it that amid the shock of her pregnancy, both the fact and the means of it, she recognises that the son she now carries, is the fulfilment of those dreams, and that hope?!

As Mary sings a fresh prophesy over the son growing in her womb, it's almost like she is the first to tentatively grasp that this child will bring a mercy and a revolution that is quite unlike what her people are expecting. In this "overture to the Gospel of Luke... [the] lyrics set the tone for Jesus' radical and controversial ministry"<sup>iii</sup> ...:

- He will fill the hungry with good things both spiritually (e.g. The beatitudes, Matthew 5:1-11) and practically through his miracles (Feeding 5000 e.g. John 6:1-14), and send the rich man away empty, until he can set aside his wealth to live generously (Matthew 19:21-22).
- He will bring down the powerful from the protected thrones of self-satisfaction (Isaiah 40:23 fulfilled in Pilot's washing of his hands, Matthew 27:23-24), and lift up the lowly who are sat blind (Luke 18:35-43) or disfigured (Mark 2:1-12).
- He will scatter the pride of the faith leaders whose hearts and actions show the hypocrisy of their words (Matthew 23).

- He will show his strength, as the Son of God, the Messiah, in humble arms flung wide upon the cross (Luke 23:32-43).

Mary is singing about everyone but herself. She is praising God for the gift of this son, and offering her understanding of both her place, and much more importantly his place, in the context of God's revelation through the people of Israel, for the whole world. The very fact that this hymn of praise and prophecy has been treasured in Elizabeth's memory to be repeated and retold down generations until it was captured in the amber of Luke's Gospel for perpetuity as an offering us, suggests that it should have similar significance for our lives. We who profess ourselves Christians, carry the Christ-child within us. Could we sing a song like Mary's, focused not on ourselves, but on what God has gifted us with, and its purpose for the world?

The cost of Mary's song would be fulfilled throughout her life:

- we hear it in the trauma of becoming a refugee in an effort to protect her child (Matthew 2:12-14);
- we listen to it in the frantic searching of a hysterical parent for a lost child whose wisdom and knowledge rapidly grows beyond her apron strings (Luke 2:41-52);
- in silence we witness it at the cross in her mute acceptance of the protection of a new child, the beloved disciple (John 19:25-27)
- we even encounter her whispered prayers, with the others gathered after Jesus' Resurrection and Ascension (Acts 1:14).

Forget whether we can actually sing in tune or not, that's not the point here. If we think of our lives as a song, are our lives singing with the prophetic passion with which Mary sang? Are we paying the price for carrying Jesus that she paid, and are we still praying, with her?

We are all very good at focusing on ourselves; I know I catch myself doing it, time and time again through each and every day, as my mind slips back from what I'm meant to be doing for others, to what I want to do instead, what I think is right, what my dreams are.

In a world context, collectively humanity is also very good at focusing on the present, and forgetting the prophecies and lessons of the past: otherwise we wouldn't be looking down the barrel of a nuclear war, forgetting washed up refugees on distant shores, wasting millions with interminable arguing over political relationships whilst people wait for hours on hospital trollies.

But

- If our lives sing a song that feeds the hungry, both physically and spiritually, we're singing Mary's song.
- If our actions lift up the lowly, and puncture the self-satisfaction of the powerful, we're singing Mary's song.
- If our voices challenge pride and hypocrisy among our leaders, including if necessary those of faith, we're singing Mary's song.
- If our arms are flung wide in sacrifice, we're singing Mary's song.

Mary was one, lone, pregnant teenager, and because of her humility, and her understanding of what God wanted of her, for the good of the whole world, she sang a song that changed the world.

Can we sing, like Mary sang?

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<sup>i</sup> <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/carlgregg/2011/12/magnificat-learning-to-sing-mary%E2%80%99s-song-a-progressive-christian-lectionary-commentary-on-luke-146-55/>

<sup>ii</sup> Tom Wright 'Luke for Everyone'

<sup>iii</sup> <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/carlgregg/2011/12/magnificat-learning-to-sing-mary%E2%80%99s-song-a-progressive-christian-lectionary-commentary-on-luke-146-55/>