

Fourth Sunday of Advent, year C

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Introduction

The final Sunday of Advent is upon us. Appropriately, the text for this Sunday is a text that combines extraordinary joy with deep justice. Mary — a young woman who has just crossed occupied territory “with haste” — has arrived at her cousin Elizabeth’s. In a chapter filled with masculinist military references, Luke chooses to amplify the story of two women, going so far as to silence the voice of Zechariah, the priest.

Mary and Elizabeth — prophets, evangelists, witness-bearers and theologians both — have an elemental recognition of each other’s story, and Luke puts this extraordinary Magnificat in the mouth of Mary, placing her alongside all the other prophets who have seen the dynamism of God in the midst of the ordinary things of life.

Text

Luke 1:39–55

In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country, where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. When Elizabeth heard Mary’s greeting, the child leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit and exclaimed with a loud cry, “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? For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leaped for joy. And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfilment of what was spoken to her by the Lord.”

And Mary said:

“My soul magnifies the Lord,
and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,
for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant.
Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed;
for the Mighty One has done great things for me,
and holy is his name.
His mercy is for those who fear him
from generation to generation.
He has shown strength with his arm;
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.
He has helped his servant Israel,
in remembrance of his mercy,
according to the promise he made to our ancestors,
to Abraham and to his descendants forever.”

Comment

The throw-away references to Mary crossing the hill country of Judea ‘with haste’ has often been explained as an indication of Mary’s excitement to visit her cousin. However, as was explored in the third week of Advent, Luke’s gospel unfolds on an extraordinarily political and militaristic landscape. There are soldiers and tetrarchs and territories everywhere — no wonder Luke has Mary crossing the country at speed.

I cannot think of Mary without thinking of a story of pilgrimage and peace amidst tensions and complications. A few years ago, I spent a day with a group of Jews and Muslims in London. They meet monthly, taking time to speak, to hear, to listen, to understand, to get to know each other, to tell difficult stories, to ask difficult questions, to work hard to disagree well. They have an interest in reconciliation and being witnesses to religious diversity across traditions sometimes fractured in relationships.

We gathered in a room at the top of a building. Initially, at the beginning of the day, we shared introductions, followed by reflecting on the story of the group — hearing why the group had met, what keeps them meeting, and what keeps them coming back.

This group represent the tensions and pains of our world. The group had taken painful pilgrimages — often against their will — to bear witness to their hope. Somebody comes from a region torn apart by violent conflict; somebody lives with an injury after a bomb; somebody’s family rejects their interfaith engagements. Somebody said they are lonely, somebody invited them to an evening out. Somebody says “I have more problems with the tensions within my own religion than I do with the tensions between people of different religions”. Everybody laughed. Bread was broken. Pain was shared. Glad and generous hearts.

We met for a full day. As we came close to lunch, someone went to a kitchen to make rice to accompany the curry. While they were doing that, some of the Muslims prepared a space in the room to pray. They invited anyone who wished to join them, and so, while Muslim friends praised the greatness of God — prayer mats facing in the same direction — others sat quietly in meditation or prayer or reflection. Someone was preparing a table for food while the only noises were ancient prayers, the rustle of clothes as people bowed, the sound of breathing.

Over lunch, we spoke of Mary, as it was a feast day of Mary in the Christian calendar. Someone asked me what the text was and we discussed that. Somebody else said “Do you know that Mary has a full Surah about her in the Qu’ran? ... Would you like to hear it?” Everyone was quiet. She said “I can remember it.” Everybody stopped eating. She recited the Surah, by memory, by heart.

Mary is a being described as the figure upon whom a religious tradition turns. The theologian Yves Congar refers to Mary is both “the final figure of Old Testament History” and notes that she is the “the original cell of the new creation in Christ by

which all humanity share in the glory of God in a new, graced way.” Luke is choosing to describe the central turning point of salvation history through the story of two women — one young and one old — living under the compromising circumstances of a country caught up in the conflict of empire.

In the Qur’an no other woman is given as much attention as Mary; indeed the 19th Chapter of the Qur’an is named after her, and of the 114 Surahs, Mary is one of eight people who has a Surah named after her.

The sacred text from the Qur’an — as sung by the woman in London — moved the group immensely.

In the gospel of Luke, Mary is at once a person of extraordinary character and a person caught up in the ordinary things of life under occupation. Karl Rahner says that Mary’s life, in the midst of the complications, poverty and sorrow it contained, gives us the courage to recognise that holiness is not so heavenly and ethereal, but is ordinary, and this helps us to see that the Ordinary Everyday can be the seat of grace in our lives.

Mary’s life — like many lives — exists between the dynamics of faith and conflict. Affected by the empire of the time, Mary’s vision is beyond time — holding an old story and a new one in her person. Luke peppers the text with references to Mary that indicate the unique place she occupies in time and Christian Theology. Mary’s journey across the hill country, and her arrival at her cousin’s house are narrated in ways that portray her as the Ark of the Covenant. Compare the following texts:

“And why is this granted me, *that the mother of my Lord should come to me* (Luke 1:43).

“[David] said, ‘*How can the ark of the Lord come to me*’ (2 Sam 6:9).

“For behold... the babe in my womb *leaped*” (Luke 1:44).

“Michal . . . looked out the window and saw David *leaping*” (2 Sam 6:16).

“And Mary remained with her about *three months*” (Luke 1:56).

“And the ark of the Lord remained in the house of Obededom the Gittite *three months*” (2 Sam 6:11).

What is it that Mary represents for Christian theology? She is the person held between received stories and emerging ones. In her — like in that brave community of friends meeting across traditions — stories meet and are held together in an integrity that calls for justice and resolution. In the ordinariness, bravery, suffering and determination of her life, we see God’s saving action in a story arcing towards beatitude.

Response

There’s an old anecdote that an order of nuns were expelled from a certain country because their morning recitation of The Magnificat was deemed to be a challenge to a dictatorial government.

It’s probably not entirely true, but I think there’s truth in it nonetheless. Many

orders of religious women have spoken truth to power and have found their home in the Magnificat, a prayer they pray by heart every morning.

Recite the Magnificat and consider how it's a psalm of challenge, of resistance and of hope for a changed order

Prayer

God of the ground,
in Mary's words we hear a vision that could change the world
and through Mary's life you changed, too.
Give us the imagination to believe
that even though we are not mighty
you can raise up songs from the dust
that change powers
for good.
Because you did this
through the *yes* of one woman.
Amen