

LUKE 1:46-55
MARY'S PRAISE

Have you ever written a song? I tried it once, at school, because I had to; the music teacher made us write a song, music and words and put them together and then bring it to the class. It sounds an easy thing to do, to write some words and then put some music to it, but mine was awful! I can't remember the words, I can't remember the tune; I just remember it was awful. Like everything, people who have the skill to write songs make it look and sound so easy! "I woke up with the tune in my head; I just sat down at the piano and half an hour later I'd written the music for *Yesterday*" said Paul McCartney; the words came later and it became one of the most-recorded songs in the history of the universe. Others will say that they start with the words and then write the music to fit. Others do it differently every time. It is a great skill to have to be able to write songs that move people's emotions, that become anthems of human experience, that are still being sung years later.

Let's imagine that you're writing a song; either you have a tune, or someone else will write the tune, or the tune will come after the words are in place. We want a song to reflect something of your life, something of your experience, something of you. What will it include? Of course, the song could have all kinds of different moods: it might be a sad song because you want to tell the story of something sad that has happened to you of late, with a touch of the blues, a slow, sad melancholy song, reflecting your sadness, emotions that perhaps songs pick up only too well. Or it might be a happy song, full of joy, a big, blousy number that reaches all the high notes and that makes people's spirit's soar as they hear it or sing it, because life is fantastic and you want to express something of that great life that you're enjoying. The fiddler Aly Bain told the story of Sophie and when she was born, he just sat down and wrote a tune for her!

What about a song to reflect your faith? It might be a song with different moods in it because there are times when faith is good and great and times when it is not. For the good times, the song would be full of praise and thanks, perhaps, reflecting all that is good about God and faith, the promises that God has made and how great are these promises and how good God is. There would also be times when the mood is quite different, sad, reflective perhaps because faith is hard, life is hard and faith is tried and tested; there are questions in our minds about God and what God is doing or not doing for us. One of the keys to a song about our faith is that it is focussed on Jesus; there would be a great temptation to focus our song on us, on me and my faith, my experience of life, what faith means to me and how I understand things. We should resist that temptation; instead focus the song on Jesus; He is the centre of our faith; He is the One who saves us; He is the One we follow; He is Lord whom we serve, so Jesus should be at the heart of our song, at the heart of our faith.

Mary's song is a song of faith that reflects her faith in her yet-to-be-born son, Jesus! Someone has called this 'the first Christmas carol' because it does say something about the coming of Jesus into the world. It is more usually called 'the Magnificat' which is the first word of the Latin version. It is the first of four songs in Luke's gospel by different people reflecting the coming of Jesus. There are songs by Zechariah, the father of John Baptist; the angels when they visit the shepherds; and Simeon the old man who sees Jesus aged eight days old in the temple when Mary and Joseph bring the baby to be dedicated to God. Mary's song is the first of these and one of the most famous songs in Christianity. There are versions of it that are whispered in monasteries, chanted in cathedrals, recited in small remote churches by candlelight, set to music with trumpets and kettledrums by Bach and sung in our church later at the end of the service.

“It is the gospel before the gospel, a fierce bright shout of triumph 30 weeks before Bethlehem, 30 years before Calvary and Easter. It goes with a swing and a clap and a stamp. It’s all about God, and it’s all about revolution. And it’s all because Jesus...” (Wright) The focus of Mary’s song is Jesus, her son who is yet to be born and she has this God-given insight into Jesus and what He would be like and what He would do and it’s all going to turn world upside-down. We see something here of the way in which God is going to bless the world through Jesus and it is Mary’s privilege to be a part of that and have a part in that great work. There is good news here for the world because child is born.

The first note in the song is praise: “*My soul...*” (v46f) Mary begins by giving praise and thanks to God. We don’t even know yet why, but her soul rejoices and soars with praise and worship to God. A great place to begin is with praise; it is where we begin every Sunday in worship, not with a downbeat reflective song, but with a great big, hymn of praise and worship that needs the full blast of the organ and trumpets and an orchestra to do it justice! It raises the spirits to come first with praise, if you let your spirit be touched by it. It is so easy to take God for granted and fail to appreciate Him; praise and worship is one way of acknowledging Him all over again and saying ‘thank you’ for all that He is and has done.

Here’s why Mary is full of praise: “*for he...*” (v48) Mary has her place now in the history of the Church; people call her ‘blessed among women’ according to Luke. But that is now, 2000 years after Jesus’ birth and reflecting the part she has played in the gospel. Of course, there are branches of the Christian Church that give Mary an even higher place than that. But back then, when all of this first took place, Mary had none of that. She was a young woman, engaged to be married to the village carpenter, in the world’s terms nobody important; you would pass her in the street and not really notice her. ‘Humble state’ sums her up: no palace, no servants, no wealth, no fame, just a life destined to be lived in the carpenter’s shop in an obscure town called Nazareth. Yet, God saw her; God took notice of Mary there; God loved her and chose her to be the mother of the Saviour of the world.

“It’s a most revolutionary canticle.” (Wm Temple) His view of the Magnificat was to advise people to be careful how you read it because will change your view of life and the world. Indeed Christians all over the poor world read this and find that it speaks to their hearts and their situations. Here, in Mary’s song, is God who cares for the needs of poor and needy people across world. Here is God who blesses the humble and the hungry and who scatters the proud and the powerful and the rich! They read this and it gives them heart because here is God who cares for people like them. We read this and it gives us heart because here is God who cares for people like us. Everyone is on the side of the rich and powerful; rich and powerful people have everything; the world looks up to them, it puts them on a pedestal and says ‘to count, you have to be like that!’ Jesus says something very different: those with humble faith are blessed; the hungry are filled, the humble lifted high Mary’s song tells us that Jesus turns the world upside down.

God turns the world upside down. Just one example of that in His choice of Mary; not someone rich and powerful, but ‘ordinary’ (and there is nothing wrong or patronising about that word!) She goes on to sing in her song about other ways in which God will turn the world upside down for the good of those in need. “*He has...*” (vv51-53) Three examples of God turning the world upside down through the ministry of Jesus: first of all, the proud are scattered, but the humble are blessed; Mary herself is an example of that. Then, powerful people are brought down, rulers are brought down from their positions of power, from their thrones, but the humble are lifted up. Thirdly, the rich are sent away empty, but the hungry are filled with good things. We can find

examples of all of these in Jesus' ministry: the proud Pharisee who thinks he has all the answers to life and religion, who takes nothing from Jesus because his heart is shut, while the man with humble faith is blessed beyond his dreams. Herod, the puppet-king who wants to see Jesus perform some kind of miracle like magic and tries to command Jesus to dance to his tune is rejected and his power means nothing. The rich young man who wants to find answers goes away sad because his wealth gets in the way of following Jesus, yet countless people who have nothing find help and health and blessing in Jesus. The world is turned upside down time and time again with Jesus.

Jesus still turns the world upside down and we still need to hear that challenge. We live in a society that honours power and wealth, fame and celebrity; that's why the newspapers are full of Tiger Woods driving into a tree last week! Our society is still full of people who are top and others who are somewhere further down. Even churches are very good at keeping that going; I was in a discussion recently that suggested that we have first- and second-class ministers depending on the terms and conditions of their appointment; churches that give clear message that some are 'in' and other are not, first and second-class Christians! Here's the challenge: God looks on the humble, not the proud; on the hungry, not the rich; on the humble not the powerful.

Our values and attitudes need to reflect that. Did you notice the attitudes that Paul tells us to 'put on' in Colossians 3? How many of these would you find in the glossy mags? Compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, patience, forgiveness, love – these are the qualities that we are to put on every day of our lives; these are the qualities that are to be seen in Christians all of the time. Yet, we seem not to hear. Christians somehow think they can be rude to one another with impunity, or gossip, or be arrogant and dismissive of others as second-class citizens, or resentful and carry that resentment on for years, or hypocritical by saying one thing and doing another. Jesus came to get rid of all that rubbish, yet we, His people, somehow think we can carry it on. Read the Magnificat again; see what Mary thinks about her son and take it to heart.

Your song would be different; your song would reflect you, your life, your faith, your experience of God. Like Mary's song, it should be centred on Jesus; our life and our faith should be centred on Jesus. He is God's gift to world, our Saviour in whom we are blessed. Jesus is no longer just Mary's Son; He is her Saviour, in whom she is blessed. Rejoice, come with praise, because God has given His Son to save us. Take note: Jesus has turned the world upside down; we will be changed!