

LUKE 1:46-55
DOWN TO EARTH

Do you have a favourite way of celebrating good news? There are all kinds of ways by which people celebrate: you might phone your friends to tell them good news, you just want to share it with as many people as you can; you might dance around the house out of sheer exuberance, though that might scare the cat; you might invite your friends to a party to share your joy with others in a different way; you might get out the champagne and sit with a quiet glass on your own, or with just your close family; you might throw your hat in air; you might sing and shout with joy; African culture does it with dancing and rhythm as we've seen this week as people celebrate the life of Nelson Mandela. As a nation, we celebrate important events in poetry: it is the job of the Poet Laureate is to write poetry for special occasions as a way of celebrating. There are all kinds of ways of celebrating, as there are all sorts of reasons for celebrating.

The Magnificat is Mary's way of celebrating the good news that God will save the world through her son. "It's one of the most famous songs in Christianity. It's been whispered in monasteries, chanted in cathedrals, recited in small remote churches by evening candlelight and set to music with trumpets and kettle drums by Johann Sebastian Bach." (NT Wright) It is not an out and out song of celebration, though. It is more of a "humble contemplation of the mercies of God" (Leon Morris). Mary considers; she stops to ponder; she reflects on what the angel has told her and what was said in her conversation with Elizabeth; and she sings, she speaks, she celebrates by these words, the first Christian hymn in the Bible. Mary is full of praise and celebration for what God has promised to her and to the world through her, and she delights in these promises and in the hope that God brings to the world in the good news of a child.

There is another way of looking at the Magnificat: it is "a most revolutionary canticle" (Archbishop Wm Temple); he warned Christians in India in the 1940's not to include this in their services because the authorities might take it the wrong way and accuse these Christians of being politically subversive. Indeed, there are Christians across the world who have taken their inspiration and desire to be part of political liberation movements from the Magnificat along with other gospel pieces such as Jesus' sermon in Nazareth in Luke chapter 4. Why? Because it turns the world upside down! There are two questions to ask of the Magnificat: What does it show us of God? What are the qualities of the Christian? For those who consider that religion and the Bible are all a bit airy-fairy, stuck in some time-warp or on another planet, here is a piece that is as down to earth as you can be. "Down to Earth" – the words that we sang at the start of the service; "the One who changed the world forever is down to earth!" There are two ways of taking these words: first, Jesus did come down to earth from heaven as a theological statement, there was some kind of downward movement; secondly, in the other sense we use the phrase, He is a down-to-earth kind of character, ordinary, humble. The Magnificat turns the world upside down. Let's have a look to see how Jesus is down to earth!

The first thing that Mary celebrates – what is God like? How would you finish the sentence: "God is..." There are all kinds of words that can fill the space in that sentence and there are times when the Bible does so in exactly that way. "God is..." But here, Mary celebrates the qualities she sees in the God who has done great things for her in the promise of her son. There are at least six qualities of God celebrated here; a quick word about each:

- **The Lord** – all through the Bible, this little word says so much about God. It is a name or title for God in the first place; then it speaks of God as King and as

- having authority, the King and Master of His people, the One who has everything in His hands; it even means much more than that!
- **The Saviour** He is God who saves and rescues His people; we've seen in the story of Exodus how the Old Testament centres around the experience of the people coming out of Egypt and into the Promised Land; God saves His people, He rescues them. Mary sees God as her Saviour; the same quality is seen in a different way.
 - **Mindful** God remembers! God cares! God sees! God notices! All of these senses are held in this notion of God being mindful, noticing Mary, seeing her, noticing what her life is like and caring for her.
 - **Mighty** God the all-powerful, the strong God whose power is great; His power is seen in all kinds of ways, from creation onwards; His power that has been at work on behalf of His people.
 - **Holy** is a harder word to tie down its meaning easily, but it speaks of difference, separateness, being set apart from; so God is set apart, separate from us, not like us, different and that carries with it the sense of being perfect.
 - **Merciful** God is full of grace, compassion, and love for His people, and for the world and He shows it by blessing a world and a people who are not worthy of His blessing.

So we have this brilliant mix of the qualities of God. There is something here about how great is our God, that He is Lord, full of majesty and glory and someone who be held in great honour, one worthy of worship. Alongside that, there is something about His love and compassion for us and for our world. There is a brilliant mix of these qualities in this song because these are exactly the qualities of God that we see in Jesus. We see in Jesus the greatness of God: people recognised His authority when He spoke, they called Him Lord, they saw it in His miracles, the signs of His Godness. We also see in Jesus the grace, mercy, compassion of God worked out as He loved His friends and cared for people that He met and ultimately gave His life. We might use different words, but if we are to sum up the way in which Jesus is depicted in the New Testament we see the same two things: the greatness of God and the grace of God. Mary sees that and speaks about God and all that He will do; she speaks as though He has already done it! This is our God; He has not changed; Mary's God is our God, strong, mighty, gracious, loving!

God blesses world, but who is this blessing for? Here is where it gets interesting! First of all, this blessing is for Mary: "*My soul...*" (Luke 1:46ff) What do we know about Mary? She was a woman in a male-dominated world, a world where women were no more than goods and chattels at times. She was young in a world that saw wisdom residing in the minds of those who were older. She was engaged to a village carpenter, sound enough, but not a man of influence; they would never be wealthy and in bad year would be poor. She lived in Nazareth, Galilee, a rural backwater, despised by the rest of Israel, looked down on as a nowhere place. There are at least four reasons by which to write Mary off; by which she is of no account; in the eyes of her own world, she would be towards the back of the queue when the blessing of God is being handed out. But no! Emphatically no! God "*has been...*" (Luke 1:48) "God has noticed me! God has done great things for me; the holy and all-powerful God has saved me and blessed me!" It is personal. Jesus is down to earth!

Again, who is the blessing for? The Top 100 in The Sunday Times Rich List? The world's top 10 most beautiful women? Those who've had their wedding photos in *Hello* magazine? The World leaders who gathered in South Africa this week? That might be the way in which our world looks to answer that question, but not the Magnificat. Listen to this list: *those who fear Him, He has lifted up the humble, He*

has filled the hungry with good things, He has helped his servant. Indeed, on the other hand, the proud are scattered, the rulers are brought down, the rich are sent away empty – this is the reason why Wm Temple called these words “revolutionary” and warned people of their impact, because they challenge people and power in our world. They turn the world upside down. Jesus didn’t walk much with the rich and powerful; He met people who were humble, He healed the sick, He was called the “friend of sinners”; the qualities and values that he taught challenged the ways of the world and turned them upside down.

We live in a world whose values are so often shaped by what we have: I overheard a conversation in the summer, a mother talking about birthday presents for her daughter, who was leaving Primary Scholl, so she would be 12 and she was buying her an I-pad and this and that and a ticket for T in the Park. I watched a woman trying to get out into traffic the other day at 8am-ish and pushing her way out and out and out till she forced the traffic on the main road to stop and let her out and I could imagine her thinking “they have to let me out; I have a large Merc 4x4.” We live in a world that judges people by what they have and if you have little or nothing, you are of no value to society! Those who get on in life are the proud and the rich and people of power and influence.

According to the Magnificat who are the people God blesses? This is all about what we are, not what we have. It is all about personal qualities: *those who fear God* is nothing about being afraid of God, but is about having a deep reverence and respect for God, a reverence and respect that lead to worship. *Humble* people see ourselves as we really are, aware of our gifts and abilities and also aware that we are flawed people and aware that we need someone to help us and save us. *Hungry* people have a deep sense of need; there is no reason to see any difference here between those who have had nothing to eat for a few days and those who have a deep yearning for God and for His peace in our hearts. *Servant* is the one who gives of himself or herself for the sake of others and to serve God and to do His will; to serve is to do someone else’s bidding or to care for someone else’s needs; the servants of God seek to do His will. All of these are personal qualities, with a very different set of values from the world around us; so Jesus turns the world upside down even before He comes!

“The One who changed the world forever is down to earth.” “He came down to earth from heaven, who is God and Lord of all” – Jesus came down! He didn’t fly down like some celestial astronaut landing in a spaceship; but He gave up the glory of heaven to come down to our world. He is down to earth in that other sense too: there are no airs and graces about Jesus; He stands on no ceremony, with no power and influence, no wealth in terms that the world understands, but He finds His home in ordinary places and lets the blessing of God rest on humble people, people who love God, people who are hungry and in need, people who seek to serve God and to do His will. Jesus is down to earth – isn’t that brilliant? It is good news. For people who want to live by faith, but don’t always get it right; who want to do the will of God, but make mistakes, for people that the world just walks past in the street, for people who need help and we know we need help, for people who try to love God and pray, but who stumble time and time again – for people like you and me, Jesus has come; He is down to earth! Doesn’t it make your heart sing!