

MARY'S MAGNIFICAT

We should be amazed that Mary, a teenage girl from Nazareth, should burst with joy when she was told that she would be the mother of the long awaited Messiah. I mean she had no husband and there *were* Jewish rules about this sort of thing.

When a young man saw the girl he desired, he consulted his father. If Papa agreed, the son would go to the 'bride-to-be's' house and speak with *her* father. At the young woman's home he would make a covenant with her – an actual contract. Then he would drink a cup of wine with her – this sealed the contract. He would then pay a price for her. Her father was entitled to money for his daughter because he would have suffered financially bringing her up because she would not have been a farm worker as a son would have been. Following this the prospective husband would make a speech to her telling her that he would be going back home to build a bridal chamber. The contract, cup and money were her security that he would return. His words would ring in her head, 'I go to prepare a place for you.' (Ring any bells?) If anyone asked the bridegroom while he was building when he was getting married, he would reply, 'I don't know, only my father knows.' (Ringing more bells?)

Mary rushed across country to tell her cousin the news. They both shared not only a common family but a common faith. So where's God in all this? Occupying himself with two obscure humble women – one old and barren, one young and virginal.

Mary is so moved by this vision of God that she goes into rapture.

*'I'm bursting with God-news;
I'm dancing the song of my Saviour God.
God took one look at me, and look what happened –
I'm the most fortunate woman on earth!
What God has done for me will never be forgotten,
the God whose very name is holy, set apart from all others.
His mercy flows wave after wave on those who are in awe before him.
He bared his arm and showed his strength,
scattering the bluffing braggarts.
He knocked tyrants off their high horses,
pulled victims out of the mud.
The starving poor sat down to a banquet;
the callous rich were left out in the cold.
He embraced his chosen child Israel;
he remembered and piled on the mercies,
piled them high.
It's exactly what he promised,
beginning with Abraham and right up to now.'* (Luke 1.46-55)

Mary and Elizabeth are wonderful heroines in Luke's account. He loves the faith of these women. The thing that impresses him most which he wants to convey to his noble reader, Theophilus a Roman official, is the lowliness and

cheerful humility of the women. Is it that the only people who can truly magnify the Lord are those who acknowledge their unworthiness and become overwhelmed by God's grace?

Mary is saturated with joy. She rejoices in God. Do we?
Her utterance is largely about 'social justice'.
God's holiness has expressed itself in exalting the lowly and abasing the haughty. Is this the same God we worship?

One of the first fathers of the early church, St Ignatius of Antioch, wrote c.110AD that Mary was to be praised and that this 'pertained to the most hidden mysteries in the silence of God'. In 431AD the Divine Maternity of Mary was proclaimed as dogma of the Church in the Council of Ephesus. This elevation has become a point of division between Roman Catholics and Protestants despite the fact that C16 Martin Luther was devoted and prayed to her. Of such details are schisms made.

Luke includes the songs of Zecharias, John the Baptist's father, and Mary because they help to reveal the expectations that the Jewish people of that time had for the Messiah. Near the beginning of his gospel, he wanted to show what people expected the Messiah to be and do.

So what does all this mean for us today?
How can we magnify God? We can't make him any bigger.
George Herbert gives a beautiful reply in one of his hymns, 'In my heart though not in heaven, I will raise thee.'
Mary praises God as one who keeps his promises.
Hope is a particular Judaeo-Christian virtue. God is not a fickle untrustworthy God – his nature is unchanging.
Mary knows that God has acted in history and will do so again.
But rather than intervene with armies of angels, he is born amongst us as a little child.
Mary's song is also a song of revolution speaking of God who turns the priorities of the world upside down.

God stoops down to us, to lift us up to himself.
That's Mary's Magnificat.

...After he rounded the street corner, my Dad would put his kitbag down, shift his hat the back of his head and hold his arms out for me as I leapt from the front iron gate and ran towards him for a swing in his arms.
May we all open our arms wide today as we run towards our Good God.



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