

Mary's Song - Advent 4

Micah 5: 2-5a, Song of Mary, Hebrews 10: 5-10, Luke 1: 39-55

And so our Advent journey has brought us to the Sunday before Christmas. We have travelled through some challenging and some uplifted territory on our road of faith this Advent. We have been called to repentance, we have met the wild and wonderful prophet John and we have been urged to reflect upon the incarnation and what difference it makes in our lives and in our vocation as God's people in the world.

Today, our readings call us to reflect upon power and powerlessness, the God of surprises, and also the immeasurable love of God.

We begin with having our attention drawn to the humble origins of Jesus the Saviour. The prophet Micah speaks of the great one who will come forth from Bethlehem, a town described as one of the little clans of Judah. The birth place of the Messiah is not a powerful wealthy city, but a tiny provincial town, one of which many, would take no notice.

The one who is to rule Israel with majesty and peace would not come from a position of human strength and power. Instead, he would bear witness to God's choice to bring forth life, hope and redemption from very little, the small things, what seems to be insignificant or powerless. This signifies God's intimate identification with poor, the humble, those the world has forgotten.

To the human mind this is a surprising, if not shocking move on God's part. We spend so much time and energy manoeuvring ourselves into positions of security, power, social standing and independent strength, and yet God says redemption and life are found in vulnerability, humility, simplicity, even poverty.

This is a message that is profoundly illustrated by the Christ child being placed into an animal's feeding trough to sleep, because his parents had nowhere else to put him.

If we turn to our gospel reading from Luke, of which, the Song of Mary is a part, we continue with these themes of power and powerlessness and the surprising way in which God works among and within us.

We pick up the story as two women share their joy, wonder and excitement about the babies they are each carrying within them. Both pregnancies were totally unexpected, both were gifts from God. Both women rejoice in God's love and faithfulness to them.

One woman, Elizabeth had been unable to conceive a child all her life, and now in her old age is to give birth to, and nurture, a child who would grow to become one who would prepare the way for the Messiah. The other woman, Mary, is a young teenager, barely more than a child herself, who has been chosen to bring the Saviour of all into the world.

The image of Mary portrayed on Christmas cards, in paintings through the ages, and in popular culture, is often that of a mature, western, refined woman. She is always presented as being clean, graceful, peaceful and beautifully clothed. I'm not quite sure why this is so. Maybe it is a cultural thing – we like to represent people and situations in our own image; perhaps it is because we somehow expect God to make choices according to our own ideals.

Would we choose a poor, peasant girl from Palestine to be the mother of Jesus? Would we choose a young girl who was not yet married, one who probably had dirty fingernails and calloused hands from hard work, one who had poor quality clothing to protect her from the sun and the cold?

I have collected some photographs of young women from around the world, and placed them in front of the altar today, to remind us that Mary was a real woman, not an idealistic dream. Perhaps we can see Mary in these faces.

Mary's song is one of great joy and thanksgiving, and I am sure she sings not only for herself but for Elizabeth, for all who are downtrodden and oppressed, for all who are enslaved by sin, imprisoned by darkness, for all who have caught a glimpse of the light and life of the kingdom of God.

Mary sings a song of wrongs being put right, where the tables are turned on the unjust and those who abuse and oppress others, where the lowly are lifted up and the hungry are fed and nourished.

It is a song that once again reminds us that God identifies most intimately with the poor and the outcast, those who are empty and longing to be filled, those who are so often passed over or considered to be insignificant or not good

enough. It is a song that declares God's presence and work in the world, his love and faithfulness towards his people, his blessing upon those who seek him.

It is a song of reassurance and hope for those who dream of a just, righteous and holy world, but it is also a song of warning for those who profit from injustice and seek power for themselves. Mary is no passive, fearful mouse who accepts anything that comes her way. She is a righteous and holy woman of passion, deep faith, grit and courage. The song she sings is one of great strength, hope and political revolution. Mary believes in a God of Love, a God of Life and a God who works in unexpected ways. No wonder she was chosen to give birth to God 's redeeming presence in the world.

Finally, the gift of the reading from Hebrews. Here we have the theme of sacrifice and offering which comes through so strongly in the writing of many of the prophets. God does not desire burnt offerings or ritual sacrifices for sin, but God desires an offering of deep love, a sacrifice of true thanksgiving and the gift of one's whole self.

What God desires we cannot give on our own, and so God offers himself in our place: *Sacrifices and offerings you have not desired, but a body you have prepared for me.... And it is by God's will that we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once and for all.* (vs 5, 10)

The coming of the Messiah, Jesus Christ, is the offering of God's self, in love, for our sake. Through Christ we are made holy, and are brought into an eternal, life-giving relationship with God.

As we celebrate Christmas let us not get distracted by the food, the tinsel, the socialising; for we are celebrating the ultimate gift of love, and that deserves our prayerful reflection, deep gratitude and thanksgiving, and a commitment to a new way of life that honours that gift. Today we are reminded of how much we are deeply and completely loved by God, and so, like Mary and Elizabeth, we give thanks and praise.

And so, as we go out into the world this week let us celebrate what God can do with our humble and meagre offerings.

Let us be agitators for the turning of the tables of power and injustice in the world.

Let us sing out loud for those who have not yet found their voices, and pray earnestly for those who cannot find words for the longing of their hearts.

Let us go out in hope, peace, joy and love as we too give birth to God's redeeming presence in the world.

The Lord be with you.