Sunday 16 October

_Sounding the Depths: Mary’s Magnificat_ (Luke 1: 39-56)

Some years ago I was asked to write about Mary for an encyclopedia of religion. I was amused to discover that my entry on Mary came immediately after the entry on Karl Marx.

Mary’s Magnificat has been read by some as a revolutionary manifesto. It shows us Mary as a daring prophet, full of joy and confidence in her vocation, cheerleader of God’s people on their path to liberation.

But the Magnificat is not a call to revolution. It’s more radical and challenging than that. It tells us that God has already transformed the world, and we must learn to live in the light of that altered reality, beyond all the seductions of power and domination. The Magnificat shows us the world as it really is, when our proud illusions of status and grandeur have been stripped away and we stand with Mary and Elizabeth in joyful humility before the justice and mercy of God.

Yet the world that Mary describes is the same as it always has been. The Magnificat is about a change in our way of seeing, not about a change in the way things are.
I sometimes think of those pictures made up of coloured dots, where some people see a dolphin in the pattern of the dots, and others can’t see it at all; or those images where some see a rabbit, and others see a duck. The Magnificat is I believe a bit like that. It asks us to take a fresh look at the world, and see something we’ve never seen before. It asks us to imagine how we would live if we really and truly believed that the God of Jesus Christ was present in this world, just as it is.

Original sin is a distortion of our human vision. It prevents us from recognising God, the source and end of all our desire, in and through the beauty of creation. We begin to see God’s creation through a fog of fear and alienation. We begin to view one another as potential enemies or threats. Sin is a form of distractedness that leads us to seek consolation in the things of the world, trying to scratch the existential itch, trying to ignore the desire for God that thunders and howls through us. This is what St Augustine describes in his famous prayer in *The Confessions*, ‘Late have I loved you’:

You were with me,  
But I was not with You.  
Beautiful things kept me far off from You –  
Things which, if not in You, would not be,  
Not be at all.

You called and shouted out  
And shattered my deafness.  
You flashed, You blazed.  
And my blindness fled.  
You were fragrant, and I drew in my breath  
And panted for You.¹

You flashed, You blazed. And my blindness fled. The Magnificat is what Mary saw when God flashed and blazed through the hidden ordinariness of her life.

So the transformation that enables us to inhabit the world of the Magnificat is not a revolution but a healing of sight. Mary tells us what the world looks

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¹ This translation is from William Harmless, *Augustine in His Own Words* (Washington DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2010), pp. 33-4.
like when grace enables us to see through and beyond the trappings of worldly institutions and hierarchies, to the topsy-turvy truth of God’s kingdom among us. We discover that we inhabit a universe that shivers and shimmers with the love of God.

I live on a houseboat in Twickenham. Every morning, a kingfisher flashes along the river and comes to perch on a branch on the opposite bank. It feels like a benediction on the day, as I sit on the deck drinking my coffee. It makes me think of Gerard Manley Hopkins’ poem, ‘As Kingfishers Catch Fire’. Its wings really do seem to catch fire in the morning light, as it hovers and swoops for tiny fish. Hopkins writes of Christ who

plays in ten thousand places,
Lovely in limbs, and lovely in eyes not his
To the Father through the features of men’s faces.

I quote Hopkins because the rhythms of his poetry seem to express the reverberations of grace within creation. When he was a Jesuit, he was based at Manresa House which is home to Whitelands College at the University of Roehampton where I work. I’m sure there are dozens of blue plaques to famous people at Cambridge, but maybe our one blue plaque for Hopkins makes up in quality what we lack in quantity.

In his poem, ‘God’s Grandeur’, Hopkins writes of ‘the dearest freshness deep down things’. This is the grace that rises up to greet us from the depths of creation. That’s why I’ve called this sermon ‘Sounding the Depths’.

From the beginning, Christianity has been seduced by the God of Greek philosophy. This has resulted in a rationalised theological system in which the wild and creative artistry of God has been domesticated by the limitations of human reason. We forget what happened when Job’s comforters tried to offer him rational explanations for his suffering. God spoke to Job out of the whirlwind, and confounded his quest for answers by pointing to the majesty and mystery of nature.

So much Christian theology has been a quest to rise above nature, including our own human nature, in order to draw closer to God. This is a quest for the all-knowing, all-powerful God who, as philosopher Ludwig Feuerbach pointed out, is a projection of man’s ideal image of himself. Feminist
philosopher Grace Jantzen wryly observes that, according to this view of God, ‘anyone who can imagine “himself” as an infinitely extended (and disembodied) version of an Oxford professor is an analogue of the divine’. (I’m sure Cambridge professors are not like that).

Jantzen and other feminist Christian thinkers argue that this kind of theology wages war on the body, and particularly on the female body, which is associated with everything that lures the man of God away from his yearning for a rational absolute above and beyond himself and the world.

Yet this insight is not unique to modern feminists. The earliest theologians scandalised their philosophical counterparts with their claim that God had been born of a woman, and had been crucified and died on the cross. Plato’s philosopher sought to discover the source of truth by rising up from the depths of the earth, to the pure and blinding abstraction of the light, the idea, the form. The earliest Christian theologians spoke of a God who reverses that journey. In a Christmas Day sermon, Saint Augustine preached on Psalm 85, verse 11: ‘Truth has sprung from the earth, and Justice has looked forth from heaven’. Here is what Augustine said:

Truth, which is in the bosom of the Father (Jn 1:18), has sprung from the earth, in order also to be in the bosom of his mother. Truth, by which the world is held together, has sprung from the earth, in order to be carried in a woman’s arms. Truth, on which the bliss of the angels is incorruptibly nourished, has sprung from the earth, in order to be suckled at breasts of flesh. Truth, which heaven is not big enough to hold, has sprung from the earth, in order to be placed in a manger.

Jesus brings God down to earth, and Mary’s Magnificat tells us what that means. If we seek God, we must make a downward journey with God, into the fleshy depths of the human condition, into the chaos, into the mess, into the margins. Where human power is least visible, where human glory is least manifest, where human hunger is most urgent and human poverty is most extreme, there we must seek the power and the glory, the abundance and the riches of God. If Christians had taken the Magnificat to heart, maybe Marx wouldn’t have been necessary at all.

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2 Grace Jantzen, Becoming Divine: Towards a Feminist Philosophy of Religion (Manchester University Press, 1998), p. 28
3 Augustine, Sermon 185, 1.
But to read the Magnificat as revolutionary is to misunderstand the nature of redemption. It’s to confuse eschatology – God’s promise of perfect peace at the end of time – with utopianism – the quest to end suffering through human endeavour. Scripture tells us that there will come a time when God will wipe away every tear, and there will be no more suffering and sorrow and death, but we can’t bring about heaven on earth by human endeavour. There’s a point at which we can only eliminate suffering by eliminating the humans who cause and experience suffering, and that’s why every utopian movement trails in its wake the threat of unthinkable violence.

I grew up in Zambia, and in 1980 after many travels my husband Dave and I went to live in Zimbabwe with our then two small children. (We had two more while we were there.) We arrived six months after the end of UDI, when Robert Mugabe came to power, and there was a great sense of optimism. But that too was a failed revolution, and the heroic freedom fighter has become the tyrannical oppressor of his people.

None of this is to deny that Christians are called to political participation and active citizenship, but there’s nothing uniquely Christian about that. As Aristotle and Thomas Aquinas both recognised, we are political animals by nature. To be publicly engaged and socially interactive is what it means to be human, but Christianity calls for something more. What is that something more?

The Magnificat ushers us into a hidden world of love, subsisting beneath all our institutions, laws and structures. And love can never be institutionalised, politicised or organised. Beyond its worldly pomp and ceremony, its hierarchies and trappings of power, Christianity becomes true to itself when it inspires one human being to reach out to another in mutual vulnerability and love, and to ask, ‘Who art thou?’ This is what Mary did when she set out to visit her elderly cousin Elizabeth. It’s what we do whenever our own experience of difficulty, struggle and loss makes us open and attentive to the suffering of others. And we should remember that Mary’s pregnancy was a difficult and painful gift. It scandalised Joseph and the neighbours, and risked her being stoned to death for adultery.

French philosopher and mystic Simone Weil died in Kent in 1943, her health depleted by the hardships she endured in solidarity with the occupants of
German-occupied France. She beautifully expresses what this loving attentiveness means, when she writes:

The fullness of love for neighbour is simply the capacity to ask the question, ‘What is your agony?’ It is to know that the afflicted exist, not as a unit in a collection, nor as an example of a social category labelled ‘the afflicted,’ but in all their humanity, exactly like us. … For this reason, it is sufficient but also indispensable to know how to look upon them in a certain way.⁴

The Magnificat tells us that God looks upon our vulnerability and sorrow with that kind of attentiveness, and we are called to do likewise.

We might heed William Blake’s words from his great poem Jerusalem:

Labour well the Minute Particulars: attend to the Little Ones;  
And those who are in misery cannot remain so long,  
If we do but our duty: labour well the teeming Earth…  
He who would do good to another must do it in Minute Particulars.  
General Good is the plea of the scoundrel, hypocrite, and flatterer.

This theme of doing good by minute particulars is the connecting theme that runs through Dostoevsky’s great novel, The Brothers Karamazov. There we read of a doctor who sorrowfully acknowledges that ‘the more I love mankind in general, the less I love people in particular. … On the other hand, it has always happened that the more I hate people individually, the more ardent becomes my love for humanity as a whole.’⁵

Dostoevsky wrote that after he himself had been imprisoned for associating with the revolutionaries of nineteenth century Russia, even though he had distanced himself from the violence they advocated. The revolutionary will always agree with the high priest Caiaphus, that ‘it is better that one man die for the people than that the whole nation perish.’ (Jn 11:50). In Jesus Christ, God becomes that one man who dies for the people, multiplied in men, women and children countless times throughout history and still today, whenever people decide that their cause is worth killing for, or allowing others to die to defend.

The kingdom of peace that Mary proclaims is a kingdom of the vulnerable, and that means that it acts as a magnet for all the wrath and violence of human power. The woman of the Magnificat is also the woman of Calvary. These two pregnant women singing their joy to God will one day find themselves standing with the mothers of all the murdered children of history. Mary will see this child of grace and miracle, this Son of God, cry out in his death throes: ‘My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?’

The Kingdom that Mary reveals is not a kingdom that takes the crucified down from their crosses. It demands something much more difficult. It asks us to stand with the crucified and to share their suffering, to stay with them when everybody else has run away, to keep faith outside their tombs on Holy Saturday when even God is dead, to tell their stories and refuse to abandon the dangerous memories that disrupt our settled histories.

Jon Sobrino is a Jesuit theologian from El Salvador whose six Jesuit housemates were murdered by the Salvadoran Army along with their housekeeper and her daughter. Here is what he wrote not long afterwards:

The cross reveals, not power, but impotence. God does not triumph on the cross over the power of evil, but succumbs to it. … [Faith] sees in this the love of God in solidarity, to the end, with human beings, but what appears on the cross on the surface is the triumph of the idols of death over the God of life. The idea that in the battle of the gods the true God could lose and through that defeat prove himself the true God requires us to rethink his transcendence.⁶

Here, we encounter the paradox of the Christian faith. The Magnificat is not just about human powerlessness and humility. It’s also about the power and glory of God. Jesus is fully human and fully divine, but our human reason is too limited to understand what that means. We understand what it means to speak in terms of human or divine, word or flesh, virgin or mother, but Christianity offers us a language of improbable couplings and paradoxes that are intended to mystify us.

Human understanding seeks to pin down the mystery, to capture it and encapsulate it so that it becomes manageable. Either we emphasise the divinity of Christ and lose sight of his humanity, in which case we get an inhumane God of unbending doctrines and dogmas, or we emphasise the humanity of Christ and lose sight of his divinity, in which case we get a politicised Jesus of ideological rhetoric.

Jesus is fully human and fully divine. This is not a form of knowledge to be grasped but the confession of a mystery to be surrendered to and a faith to be lived.

To inhabit this mystery, we have to see something that the world doesn’t see, about the love of power and the power of love. The Magnificat is a world that is not of this world, and yet it’s to be found nowhere but in this world. Christians are called to be in the world but not of the world. We are citizens of heaven, St Paul tells us. That’s a citizenship that nobody can take from us, a border that nobody can defend with barbed wire fences or watchtowers. It’s a kingdom whose citizenship is made up entirely of asylum seekers. What does it mean today if we look around us and ask our fellow citizens of God’s kingdom, ‘What is your agony?’ I don’t think we’ll find that question in any citizenship test, but it’s the only passport that gives us entry into that mysterious kingdom of love which is hidden in plain view among us and around us, and which becomes visible to those who are attentive, who see the world through the eyes of grace.

Anglican hermit and contemplative Maggie Ross uses the biblical term “beholding” to describe this kind of seeing. Ross points out how often that word “behold” is translated in impoverished and reductive ways. It’s a command that occurs more than 1300 times in Hebrew and Greek versions of the Bible, but it hardly appears at all in English translations. Beholding is not looking or seeing or remembering – words used in various translations. Beholding is what we begin to perceive when, in profound silence, we contemplate the mystery of God in creation and allow ourselves to be awakened by that mystery. Ross points out that, ‘After God has blessed the newly created humans, the first word he speaks to them directly is “Behold” (Gen. 1:29).’ This, says Ross, ‘is the first covenant, and the only one necessary; the later covenants are concessions to those who will not
behold.’⁷ The Magnificat is what we see when we discover what it means to behold.

So let me end with Gerard Manley Hopkins’ poem, ‘God’s Grandeur’, as an evocation of what it means to inhabit God’s Kingdom by beholding anew the world as it is:

THE WORLD is charged with the grandeur of God.
   It will flame out, like shining from shook foil;
   It gathers to a greatness, like the ooze of oil
Crushed. Why do men then now not reck his rod?
Generations have trod, have trod, have trod;
   And all is seared with trade; bleared, smeared with toil;
   And wears man’s smudge and shares man’s smell: the soil
Is bare now, nor can foot feel, being shod.

And for all this, nature is never spent;
   There lives the dearest freshness deep down things;
And though the last lights off the black West went
   Oh, morning, at the brown brink eastward, springs—
Because the Holy Ghost over the bent
   World broods with warm breast and with ah! bright wings.

⁷ Maggie Ross, Writing the Icon of the Heart: In Silence Beholding (The Bible Reading Fellowship, 2009), p. 10.