

Luke 1: 46-55 – The Magnificat

Kippax Uniting Church, 19 December 2021

Robbie Tulip

In her great hymn of praise to God, known as the Magnificat, Mary says "My soul magnifies the Lord." Mary, the Mother of Christ, is saying that her deepest personal identity, her soul, exalts the greatness and grandeur and glory and grace of God, through praise and awe and wonder and reverence. This meaning of magnify, to exalt, is rather old fashioned. It made me wonder if we could also think of this image as somehow like a magnifying glass, increasing the apparent size of something we look at.

God is not to be imagined in such physical terms. Prayer cannot make the infinite and eternal majesty of God look bigger. However, contemplative prayer and praise do increase the presence of God in the world by strengthening faith. Mary's vision of magnifying God in the Magnificat has a powerful ethical meaning. It reminds me of Saint Paul's comment in Romans 8:28 that "God causes everything to work together for the good of those who love God." In exalting God, Mary celebrates how God works for good through our love. Like Elizabeth feeling John the Baptist jump for joy in her womb when Mary came to greet her, Saint Paul also sees a sublime unity in the divine presence in the world. God is manifest in love, bringing everything together.

We encounter God through the transcendental imagination of faith and love, constructing our own vision of the meaning and purpose of God's call for our life. Informing our thoughts, the Biblical vision in the Magnificat helps us to see how all things connect in the incarnation of Christ, the word made flesh. Recalling the prophecy of Micah that the Messiah would come from Bethlehem, we can explore Micah's description of the origin of Christ as eternal to see what it means for us to describe Christ as the Son of God. Micah sees this divine power of the connection to the timeless grandeur of God to prophecy the incarnate power of Christ in the world as the prince of peace, reconciling and redeeming the world. Mary the Mother of Christ participates in this saving work of redemption of the world brought by her son, integrating heaven and earth. In terms of our Advent theme today, the sanctuary of love, the Magnificat expresses how love enables a sense of belonging that magnifies the presence of God in the world. Christian faith can be a magnificent sanctuary of contemplation and togetherness, opening us to the wisdom of love.

The divine purpose given to Mary is to give birth to Christ the saviour of the world, who brings all things together in love. The presence of Christ and the Holy Spirit in the world magnify and glorify the presence of the gracious love of God by embodying the eternal within time. The story of Jesus connects us to each other and to the eternal values of God, serving to transform our mundane world toward the divine and timeless values of love and justice and truth.

Mary rejoices that even though she is humble, she knows she will be remembered for ever due to the awesome power of the incarnation of Christ within her. Where this starts to get controversial is when Mary explains how the nature of divine power is profoundly incompatible with our worldly understanding of human power. The truth of God calls for a transformation of the world. In Mary's view, God will "scatter the proud in the imagination of their heart, put down princes from their thrones, exalt the lowly, fill the hungry with good things, and send the rich away empty." This is an extraordinary statement of justice and human liberation, a radical transformative vision of how the Kingdom of God inverts the values of the kingdoms of the world.

This remarkable text contrasts with popular devotional piety around Mary by extending a direct challenge to our political priorities. Mary calls out the fallen nature of our world in a statement of courageous vision. She imagines that instead of the corrupt and cruel and degraded ethical values of the kingdoms of the world, we can build a world grounded in the eternal values of the grace of God, a world of trust and belonging and love and faith and safety.

Mary identifies the arrogance of power as a key problem for the Kingdom of God. What Mary calls the imagination in the hearts of the proud describes how people allow themselves to be seduced by false belief. In the psychology of pride, people are deluded by claims that serve their selfish interests rather than broader moral values. Where the proud come together to rule the kingdoms of the world, such selfish values seriously distort our community priorities. Mary teaches us that in the Kingdom of God the proud are scattered as their false beliefs are overcome. In the kingdom of God, we need to live under the eye of eternity to see and overcome the structural sin of the world.

This is all a core moral teaching in the Gospels, that selfish individualistic attitudes are incompatible with the ethical vision of the Kingdom of God, and we need instead to come together in relationship. Christ expands Mary's ethical vision in the Sermon on the Mount, extending the blessing of God proclaimed for people who live at the margins of society. Jesus pronounces eight blessings in the Beatitudes, for the poor, for those who mourn, for the meek, for those who hunger for justice, for the merciful, for the pure, for peacemakers and for the persecuted. These eight blessings are all things that dispossessed people can easily relate to, showing the mission of God for our world.

The Magnificat shows how Mary is entirely awake to the pervasive human attitudes that put self before God. When we allow greed and pride and ignorance to distort our values and beliefs, we create widespread needless suffering. By linking these failures of the human heart to an economic and social analysis of hunger and wealth, exalting the least of the world, Mary presents a vision that subverts the moral legitimacy of our worldly empires. For God to put princes down from their thrones, as Mary proclaims, implies that those rulers are not morally legitimate. Mary is suggesting the rulers of our world are out of touch with the mandate of heaven.

The Magnificat is celebrated in the theology of liberation as a statement of social justice, a celebration of inclusion, diversity and equity. In saying that Mary is awake to the deceptions practiced by the powerful, we might even call her the Queen of Woke.

And yet this political interpretation is only part of the story. Mary is not promoting a message of social division or burning resentment. Her call is entirely about love, the abundant, overflowing, absolute, unconditional, infinite and eternal love of God for the world. The Magnificat is far from a seditious call for communist revolution. Recall that Jesus told us in the Sermon on the Mount to love our enemies. Mary concludes the Magnificat by saying that God helps Israel in a spirit of mercy, recollecting and respecting Israel's deeply conservative heritage of faith since Abraham. The Gospels show that Israel was just as confused and broken and traumatised as any other society, in need of forgiveness and redemption, with leaders who failed to follow the visions of the prophets. Mary's call for God's mercy to Israel stands in tension with her observation that God will bring down the princes of the world. The Magnificat shows how Christian faith presents a profound critique of worldly values, challenging the authoritarian and divisive methods of secular power systems.

Mary's vision of the mercy of God presents a message of respect, reconciliation, forgiveness and tolerance. The essence of Christianity seeks to dissolve boundaries, to break down the barriers between us, to promote mutual understanding and dialogue, seeing Christ among the least of the world. In Mary's simple ideas God builds for us a sanctuary of love, a home of freedom. As we seek to find the true wisdom that supports Mary's magnificent vision of hope and love, perhaps we do in some sense place God under the magnifying glass, expanding our own understanding of the meaning of God for our world today. Amen

Prayers for Others

At this time of preparation for Christmas, as we wait for the day of arrival of Christ, we come to a time of stillness. Our prayers are with all families, and for people who do not have families or whose families are separated. We pray that families may be a sanctuary of love. In our prayers for children our concern is immediately drawn to the tragic death of the children playing on the jumping castle in Tasmania. What should have been a time of fun and friendship turned to sorrow and grief. We pray for their families and communities.

Loving eternal God, we praise and thank you for your presence with us in our world through Jesus Christ your Son. We pray now for our medical systems and governments as they struggle to deal with this new wave of the Covid pandemic. We pray that we may all keep safe, and for caution about this highly infective Omicron strain. We pray for people who hesitate to get vaccinated, that their unfounded suspicions about vaccination may be answered, and that we can all work together as a community to minimise the suffering caused by the spread of this disease.

The extreme tornadoes that hit the USA last week and yesterday's extreme typhoon in the Philippines are highly disturbing indications of the growing dangers of extreme weather resulting from global warming. We pray for understanding of the climate emergency, and for effective measures to address and reverse it.

Gracious Lord, we now come to a time of sharing of prayers for what is on our hearts.

Benediction

Holy God of grace and love and justice, as we conclude our time of worship together this morning we pray for your blessing upon us, upon our community and upon our world. In the name of Christ, Amen