

23 December 2018

Micah 5.2-5a

Luke 1.39-55

A Call to Rejoicing

Two women meet. They are relatives. They are both pregnant. But beyond that they are two very different women. Perhaps, in other circumstances, they may not have had very much that brought them together.

Elizabeth lives in the rather desirable area of the hill country around Jerusalem, and is married to a well-respected priest, Zechariah.

Mary is from 'up north', in Galilee and engaged to be married to the village carpenter – no real social standing to speak of.

Elizabeth is older ... beyond the normal age for child-bearing. Perhaps, probably old enough to be Mary's mother.

Mary is a young teenager, not even yet married.

Elizabeth's shame of childlessness has been taken away.

Mary's shame of pregnancy before marriage is about to hit home.

But when they meet they are bound together, because their stories are both part of one story of God breaking into this world in his Son, Jesus.

Doubtless Mary travelled the 70 difficult miles from Nazareth to Judah because she would know that in Elizabeth she had a soul-friend. Perhaps the only one who could begin to understand what was happening to her.

If, as Luke seems to hint, Mary travelled on her own to see Elizabeth this was a bold move indeed. Young women just did not travel around unaccompanied, even within their own village. They would always have a chaperone with them. But these are extraordinary circumstances.

Both of their worlds have been turned upside down. And Mary has to spend time with Elizabeth.

And they are bound in rejoicing.

But the rejoicing begins, not with Elizabeth, but with the young child in her womb, who seems to leap for joy within her when Mary enters her home.

And what the pre-natal John begins, the Holy Spirit then takes up ... and Elizabeth is overwhelmed with joy at the presence of Mary and her unborn child.

“Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the child that you will bear.”

And at this their worlds are really turned upside down, because all of the protocols of etiquette have been overturned.

It is the younger, socially lower-ranked Mary who should be speaking blessings upon the senior highly-respected Elizabeth. But that’s not what happens. Social etiquette goes out of the window.

It is Elizabeth who pronounces blessings on Mary.

Why? Because God is at work and he is turning the world upside down.

But Elizabeth then makes the even more remarkable declaration:

“Why am I so favoured that the mother of my Lord should come to me?”

The newly conceived child in the young Mary’s womb is addressed by Elizabeth as ‘my Lord’, and Mary herself as the ‘mother of my Lord.’

That’s a quite extraordinary statement.

The experience of expecting your first child is always a dramatic, life-changing event. In all sorts of ways your life is transformed and you have to start re-thinking priorities. It creates a kind of upheaval in your life that is seldom matched by any other event.

But for both Elizabeth and Mary, this upheaval was heightened, partly because for both of them their pregnancies were so unexpected. But more than that, because they had realised that God was working through their pregnancies to bring about a new world order that turned everything upside down, not just for them but for all.

And all of this leads to this exuberant rejoicing.

And Mary expresses this so powerfully in her song of praise.

Her praise initially is intensely personal – it is about what God is doing in her and through her.

“My soul glorifies the Lord
and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour,
for he has been mindful of the humble state of his servant.”

She is overwhelmed that God should have looked on her and chosen her of all people for this role.

She has been bowled over by graciousness and generosity.

There is a delighted, “Why me?” ringing underneath these words.

But then her song changes tack. From the intensely personal, (“the Mighty One has done great things for me!”); she turns to the profoundly political:

“He has performed mighty deeds with his arm;
he has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts.
He has brought down rulers from their thrones
but has lifted up the humble.
He has filled the hungry with good things,
but has sent the rich away empty.”

She has grasped what is happening. If God has chosen her, of all people, to give birth to the coming Redeemer and Saviour then God is beginning his work of turning this world upside down.

This is the beginning of something much bigger.

She knows that God’s interest in her humility and her poverty is not because she has happened to have some kind of lucky golden ticket that singles her out, but because ultimately God is on the side of all who are humble, of all who are poor, and what he is doing in her is but the beginning of a wider movement of lifting up the humble and enriching the poor.

And she is so confident in what God is going to do, that she praises God as if it has already taken place:

“He has filled the hungry with good things
but has sent the rich away empty.”

And so we move from the intensely personal to the powerfully political in this hymn of praise – personal and political.

Within Mary's rejoicing there are echoes of revolution underway – rejoicing and revolution.

At the heart of her praise, there is a theme of protest against the way the world is – praise and protest.

And so what of our rejoicing this Christmas – does it have all of these multiple dimensions?

Have we grasped the intensely personal nature of this story's meaning for us?

Or is the nativity story just another of those heart-warming communal stories that lifts the spirits, but little more?

How involved, how caught up are we? How invested in this story?

At its best, this is the story of God embracing and taking hold of our lives – addressing us as individuals, totally transforming us.

But if we have grasped the intensely personal, what about that other dimension – the powerfully political? Mary saw it clearly. There was something disruptive about God coming to us in this way. This is the beginning of a transformative revolution.

It is ironic that these events that herald good news for the poor, and hold dire warnings for the rich have become the occasion for a celebration of capitalism in the west! Every year we are told whether Christmas sales are up or down on the previous year - with the subtext that a good Christmas means bumper profits and a poor Christmas means a drop in sales.

[The following was not preached:

Mary's rejoicing was enhanced because she had grasped the revolutionary implications of the coming of Jesus. His coming will be both personally fulfilling but also socially transformative and challenging. He will not leave us content with the world as it is.

And so her song of praise is itself a song of protest and challenge.

There is a hymn by Fred Kaan, the twentieth century hymn writer which captures the spirit of Mary's song of praise – the Magnificat.

It has a great first line and a pretty weak, but telling final line:

Sing we a song of high revolt;
make great the Lord, his name exalt!
Sing we the song that Mary sang
of God at war with human wrong.

By him the poor are lifted up;
he satisfies with bread and cup
the hungry ones of many lands;
the rich must go with empty hands.

He calls us to revolt and fight
with him for what is just and right,
to sing and live Magnificat
in crowded street and council flat.]

One of the more saccharine carols that we sing is the carol *Little Jesus sweetly sleep*. We sing the words, "We will rock you, we will rock you."

The message of Christmas is not one of us gently rocking Jesus, hoping that he goes back to sleep. The message of Christmas is Jesus coming among us, and Jesus shaking us and saying, "I will rock you". Because Jesus comes to change us, not just individually and personally, but he comes to shake us up, to transform us to become part of this life-changing, world-transforming kingdom that he brings. This kingdom is intensely personal and powerfully political.

In this kingdom our rejoicing will have the theme of revolution about it. In our praise we will be caught up in joyful protest because of all that the great God is doing in our world – lifting up the humble, feeding the poor and sending the rich away empty.

So let us rejoice this Christmas at all that God is doing.