

**A Celebration of Mary, Mother of Jesus  
Luke 1. 46-55**



A few Saturdays ago a lady came into the coffee morning at St James looking for a Roman Catholic church. This lady was Polish and had very little English. My biggest challenge was to convince her that St James was not a Roman Catholic church. The visitor looked at the statue of Mary in perplexity, convinced that this must mean we were Roman Catholic. Mary made the connection - not my clerical blouse worn over an ample bosom!

It is believed that devotion to Mary was part of the tapestry of Christian belief as early as the beginning of the second century. Gradually western translators began to refer to Mary as the *Mother of God*; the figure of mother is a deeply significant one for us all and also, interestingly, gives Mary a position of power and authority. Today we remember the belief that Mary is elevated to even greater power than that of a mother; in heaven with God and Jesus Christ as our perpetual intercessor. But it is the image of Mary as pure, immaculately conceived and perpetual virgin that I have noticed during my lifetime, and for me it was that image that for a long time disconnected me from Mary. As a protestant, I rarely came upon devotion to Mary, and was brought up to view with suspicion the various dogmas. I am surprised that it was as late as 1854 that the immaculate conception of Mary was adopted as an official Catholic doctrine and the Feast of the Assumption had to wait until 1950.

I do connect with Mary now. It is through her humanity that she nurtures my relationship and my understanding of God; through the humanity that is revealed in scripture. *Revealed* - the word implies obscurity but, it strikes me, there is nothing obscure about the response to being told she is to carry the Christ child we heard today. You can almost feel Mary pregnant with a joy that is simply going to burst out of her as she says, but surely singing in her soul, "My soul doth magnify the Lord and my spirit has rejoiced in God my saviour." This is the song of the victorious! And it develops, in all of its glory, to be a song of hope for the down trodden, the poor, the ignored and a dire warning to the people of power! Jimmy Reid would have loved it and I hope he and Mary are singing it together now!

Last May, Paul, Liz and I stood together on a freezing Sunday morning at the closing worship to the great ecumenical festival of Kirchentag in Munich. The foundation of that worship was the Magnificat. The song of a maiden whose image had been the cause of division and separation was the binding tape that held together the thoughts of the protestant, the catholic and the orthodox at this ecumenical service. The crowd intermittently sang in canon "magnificat, magnificat, anima mea Dominum, anima mea Dominum." (*sing*)

While I was there the address I kind of poo poed came from the Greek Orthodox Church. I was *so* wrong. The thoughts that were shared then have become most meaningful and helpful. In that phrase " he shall have mercy on those who fear him," the dual relationship of God and us was recognised "He shall have mercy" on the one hand "on those that fear him" on the other hand. I am taking fear to mean holding someone in awe not running away terrified. "He shall have mercy on those who fear him." It is a relationship of the giver and the one who receives, knowing that he/she is made different, cleansed by what she accepts. As the couples I marry face one another to exchange rings you can get a glimpse of this relationship - the giver, moved by love to place that ring on the finger and the receiver, changed, in awe of what is happening between them. It always sends a tingle down my spine. So it is with God we can be filled with wonder.

We always have a wedding rehearsal and the logistics of exchanging the rings figures large in it. I always have to remind the couples to look at each other; to persuade the listening partner that they need to look, to be totally enfolded by the actions of their partner. They want to be distracted and

they want to look down, safe, so that the giving of the ring is being done to them rather than in partnership. From what I can gather and imagine it is as if they are afraid they will giggle, suddenly they feel vulnerable and open to other people's gazes. It is a risk. Oh, to receive the ring, incognito; oh, the amazing joy of receiving the ring as me, loved and responding!

Sometimes it feels as if God is giving me so many gifts - this place, my children, the smiles that greet me, peace - and yet I don't want to pause and share in the moment with God. I am distracted by the need to get on and do; I am afraid of being vulnerable with God in case, perhaps, I am discovered. It makes me too aware that I do not care enough for the poor and that I forget about justice and I often sleep without praying.

My childhood experience of church very different to church for children today. There was regular Sunday School on a Sunday afternoon, leaving the parents at home, so that mothers and fathers throughout the village could have quality time together I think! Then there was evensong, every week, And what do we always sing at evensong? - the Magnificat and the Nunc Dimittis. Two New Testament songs that focus, in one way or another, with Mary. I loved them and have never forgotten them. However they did not lead me to know that Mary was important to my faith. What led me to that was an entering into the human predicament of Mary. I took the risk of entering into that predicament, being involved, touched, in relationship.

Mary was so young, inexperienced and she was pregnant. I learnt so much about the involvement of God with us in just realising that there would have been the usual mess when Jesus was born; the warm, wet, heat with that baby who was God is so real. And, no sooner has Mary given birth than she has visitors! Mary and Joseph and their baby are pushed around by politics - by the greed of powerful men. On a smaller scale Mary is thrown into the blind panic of the mother who has lost her son, as Jesus stays behind in Jerusalem when they are on a trip that seems to have involved the whole of Nazareth. And her baby seems so harsh when he is older - "Dear woman, my time has not yet come." The snub seems even greater when Mary gathers *the brothers* around her and attempts a family conference only to be told "My mother and brothers are those who hear God's word and put it into practice." And what happens in the drama that makes her give up everything and follow him? - even to his death on the cross.

In the midst of this humanity is God; in the midst of this humanity is God born and among us; in the midst of this humanity is the simple yet profound action of love - from God to us, and if we are attentive, we enter into the realms of salvation.

*Sing "Magnificat, magnificat...." Amen.*

*Sing "Magnificat."*

As the service progressed in the cold, gradually the challenge broke free. It always does. Bishop Rosemarie Wenner from the United Methodist Church in Germany spoke. She spoke about the hope the magnificat gives to the poor and how comfortable that can make us feel. It can also make us content with injustice for ourselves and for others; it may have contributed to the silence endured by those who have been abused within the church. For too long, Bishop Wenner said, we have prayed the magnificat without really thinking of the poor; we have been distracted from Mary by our theological discussions and we have not lived the magnificat because our hearts have remained closed, by indifference or by fear, to the poor.

If there was just one message that could be taken away from the magnificat I wonder what it would be. I think it is that Mary was noticed. She was seen. And for us that means that God sees us