

Mary's Soul Magnifies the Lord

The sermon given at the Parish Communion Service on 23 December 2018 by the Associate Vicar, the Revd. Wendy Wale, in Beverley Minster.

Luke 1:39-56

All the people gathered in the square and Ezra read the Scriptures from early morning until midday- all the people stood up, they worshipped God, they wept when they heard

I know some amazing women! Let me introduce you to 2 of them. My friend Sonya is a vicar in Liverpool. As a young woman she was attacked so brutally it left her unable to have children. She and her husband decided to foster instead so they could combine their love of children with their love of travel. 2 boys- I just want you to be my Mum and Dad... 15 years later- Robert came along....theology masters on childlessness in the Bible, but also it's impact on women in the church today.

My friend Susie felt called by God to be a mother but was in her early 40s and there was no sign of either a husband or baby....so she began the adoption process. Several incredibly tough years and some huge disappointments later she is now the proud Mum of a gorgeous little boy who was rescued from extreme neglect. He has complex needs, there are hospital trips and battles that are hard as a single parent. Thankfully- he has some great grandparents and god parents (he he he!)

I know some incredible men as well, I'm married to one....but this morning is all about the women...in particular another 2 childless women- Mary and Elizabeth.

Neither had any expectation of being mothers- Elizabeth was elderly and unable to conceive. Mary was betrothed and knew the possible consequences of having a child out of wedlock. They trusted God with their lives and we assume, had no sense of the angelic bombshells that were to turn both their worlds upside down!

Our gospel reading today is a bit like turning on the first century equivalent of Emmerdale having missed several key episodes- you switch on to see one of the main

characters is marching for miles through the countryside desperate to reach their destination- clearly bursting with huge news.

You discover that in the episodes you missed, Elizabeth's priestly husband was struck dumb for refusing to believe the angel who told him his retirement age wife was pregnant as well as Mary's own shocking encounter with an angel telling her she was going to give birth to God's own son Jesus who will save the world....

As a first century viewer you would be holding your breath with anticipation at the thought of an unmarried woman telling an elderly priest and his wife that she is pregnant....Mary was surely prepared for rejection, scandal and social isolation. Elizabeth would have been only too familiar with all these feelings. Childlessness came with huge stigma- child birth being a sign of God's blessing and favour, being barren was experienced as just the opposite.

Elizabeth and her husband Zachariah greet Mary with open arms and hearts. Elizabeth felt her baby (John the Baptist as we've been hearing about in the past few weeks) leap in her womb and cried:

as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leaped for joy. And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord."

What follows is one of the most iconically well known- and sung, beautiful and important passages in the whole of scripture. Mary's Magnificat (named from the Latin). It's easy to let the familiar words wash over us- but taking a fresh look reminds us of just how radical and revolutionary Mary's response was....this is no meek and mild puppet female!

*"My soul magnifies the Lord,
and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour,
for he has looked with favour on the lowliness of his servant.
Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed;*

Mary, wanted by God, according to the angel, for her bold, independent, adventuresome spirit, decides to bear a holy child – for a bold agenda: to bring the mighty down from their thrones; to scatter the proud in the imagination of their hearts, to fill the hungry with good things and send the rich empty away. This is Mary: well-spoken, wise, gritty.

Her words are powerful and prophetic- reflecting God's promises throughout the Jewish Scriptures- also indicating the politically subversive nature of Jesus ministry.

He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy, according to the promise he made to our ancestors, to Abraham and to his descendants forever.”

Travelling alone, like every prophet before her, she sets out on her first journey, to her cousin Elizabeth's house, to declare her agenda. There will be more journeys: to Bethlehem; to Egypt and back; to Jerusalem when Jesus is twelve; to Jerusalem when he is crucified.

I know some incredible women....there are many more incredible women here today. May all of us take courage and inspiration from the radical vision for women at the heart of the gospel.

Mary goes on to give birth in a barn, she lies down animals, and welcomes weathered shepherds in the middle of the night. She is determined, not domestic; free, not foolish; holy, not helpless; strong, not submissive. She beckons women everywhere to speak out for God's justice, which is waiting to be born into this world.

Hail Mary, full of grace, guts and glory.

Hail incredible women- and men of the Minster- may we follow her bold example and walk into 2019 seeking justice and empowerment for the least, the last, the outcast and the marginalised.

Luke 1:39-56

³⁹ In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country, ⁴⁰ where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. ⁴¹ When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit ⁴² and exclaimed with a loud cry, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. ⁴³ And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me? ⁴⁴ For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leaped for joy. ⁴⁵ And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord."

⁴⁶ And Mar^j said, "My soul magnifies the Lord,

⁴⁷ and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour,

⁴⁸ for he has looked with favour on the lowliness of his servant.

Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed;

⁴⁹ for the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name.

⁵⁰ His mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation.

⁵¹ He has shown strength with his arm;

he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.

⁵² He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly;

⁵³ he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty.

⁵⁴ He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy,

⁵⁵ according to the promise he made to our ancestors,

to Abraham and to his descendants forever."

⁵⁶ And Mary remained with her about three months and then returned to her home.