

The Fourth Sunday of Advent 2024

(Sermon by Ally Barrett)

John the Baptist recognises it straight away, he's not even born yet, but leaps in Elizabeth's womb when Mary arrives, and he sense the Kingdom and its unborn King close by. 'The Kingdom of God is near at hand' – that's what he'll grow up to say. Right now, it's growing in Mary's body, recognised by John, by Elizabeth and by Mary herself. This experience of the unborn babies leaping in the womb, and the insight that it brings, is what gives rise to Mary's prophetic song that we know as the Magnificat. A song of power, and justice and blessing that expresses the character of the Kingdom of God, growing like a seed, unseen.

Notice how the Magnificat is both particular and universal. First in terms of time. We tend (well, I've tended) to hear the Magnificat as the capturing of a particular moment, which looks towards future hope and promise at what God is going to do. It echoes the words of Isaiah, and pre-echoes Jesus' use of those words in his 'Nazareth Manifesto' three chapters later in Luke's gospel: promising freedom for the oppressed, liberty for the captives, good news for the poor. We might well look around us and think that just as in Mary's day we are still waiting for those promises to be fulfilled. But despite all the brokenness of Mary's world, she has the faith to sing in the past tense, as if this programme of liberation has already taken place: God has put down the mighty from the seat, God has scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts. Against all the odds she is able to witness to God's faithfulness throughout all times and places. It's a song that pours out of a particular moment, but its scope is the whole of history and beyond – what was, and is, and is to come. There is a core of absolute certainty in Mary's song that what God has begun, God will complete, that in the child growing in her womb all God's promises have already been fulfilled.

Notice also that the song is particular and universal in terms of the person too. Mary talks about what God has done for her (she understands herself to have been lifted up, favoured, 'seen' and blessed). This quickly expands to be about what God is doing for the whole world. A baby always turns the

parents' world upside down. This baby is turning the *whole* world upside down. Mary's willingness to go along with this extraordinary upheaval must now be shown by us all, and by the world so that what God has done for her might be done for all people and for the whole of creation, so that all might be lifted up, all might be seen, favoured and blessed.

This leap from the particular (Mary, at that moment) to the universal (the world, in all time and places) happens in today's gospel by means of the relational and communal. The Magnificat emerges out of an experience that is shared – Mary and Elizabeth share one another's vocation, one another's joy, one another's sense of overwhelm, and in that encounter the empathy and solidarity they each feel for the other is what enables their obedience to bring forth praise and prophecy. And in turn Mary's empathy expands to encompass *all* the hungry, *all* the lowly, and her joy encompasses *all* that God has done, and her prophecy expands to include *all* whom God has called, so that even we, two thousand years later, can hear in her words, our own calling.

That same solidarity is true in this moment of joy, and also in times of sorrow and pain. Remember that it was the women who stood alongside Mary at the foot of the cross, as that part of Mary's vocation came to its heartbreaking culmination: 'a sword will pierce your own soul too', Simeon will promise when Mary and Joseph take their little son to be presented at the Temple. Some of you may know that I painted the illustrations for Paula Gooder's book *Women of the Nativity*, which includes in it two paintings focusing on this solidarity. One is for the Holy Innocents, those children murdered by King Herod. In this painting, Rachel, a mother wracked my grief, holding the empty baby blanket, is surrounded by a group of women who represent all the mothers of scripture whose children were lost Eve, Bathsheba, and the rest. They are in the painting because for Rachel to have to grieve alone was too much to bear. The other painting is of Elizabeth with baby John, the miracle child of her old age. She, too, is surrounded by the mothers whose children were unexpected but longed for gifts. Again, she stands in a long line of women for whom God's calling brought joy as well as heartache.

The solidarity in joy and sorrow that emerges from this reading and its wider biblical context is, of course, a reflection of the incarnation itself, and creeps into some of our best loved Christmas carols: 'And he feeleth for our sadness, and he shareth in our gladness' as it appears in *Once in Royal David's city*. It's not an accident that the incarnation stories are peppered with instances of human empathy, for the incarnation itself is the greatest act of empathy and solidarity in the history of the cosmos, the great movement of love from God to God's world. Mary is carrying in her own body this great act of divine empathy. No wonder that she undertook the journey to stand alongside her cousin in their shared vocation, no wonder that she breaks into songs of justice, no wonder that she will draw other women alongside her at the moment of her greatest sorrow. In these stories of Mary, we see so much of how God's love works in action, and the impact of Mary's willingness to go along with all that the incarnation means.

Can we learn to love the disruption of the child in the manger? Can we look at what God is doing in the lives of others and rejoice and weep and stand with them? And when we strive for justice and liberation, when we work to feed the hungry, can we see these as signs that the kingdom is growing within us, and leaping for joy as we recognise the signs of that growing kingdom in others, and they in us? In the intensity of our time together in this season of the incarnation, may our encounters prompt the stirring within us of what God is doing, and a greater attentiveness to what God is doing in the world.

Amen.