

“MARY’S SONG”

Luke 1:46-55

Finding that you’re going to have a baby is quite an emotional experience, isn’t it? Clearly, I – as a man – know only part of the story, but when we discovered on three occasions that there was baby on the way, we were pretty chuffed. As I’m sure Alex and Catherine were when the little person who turned out to be Logan first showed up on the tests, the scans and the growing lump (I couldn’t think of a better word for it – sorry! Maybe I’ll ask my midwife daughter before I preach on this again.)

The emotions are a bit mixed, as well, aren’t they? There’s a certain amount of curiosity involved, and, of course, apprehensiveness. This is going to be a pretty significant life-changing experience. And, if you’re the mother, then it may mean a bit of discomfort at some point (so I’m told). There may be some anxiety. But there’s also a lot of excitement – plans for the future, things to buy and make, rooms to decorate, people to tell. And, of course, there’s a great deal of joy.

It’s Advent Sunday today, the beginning of the season of waiting for the birth of Jesus. At this time of year we start to think about Mary and all that she had to go through in the months before the birth of the Son of God and the Saviour of the world. This morning we’re reflecting on her response to the news that she was going to have a son. That in itself would have been an occasion for joy, but the circumstances surrounding the birth of Jesus compounded that joy. On the downside, Mary was as yet unmarried and, in a culture where it was still important to do things in the right way – and, indeed, the right order – that could have caused some difficulties.

But on the upside, this birth was predicted in a way that was pretty spectacular. No nipping down the chemist for a pregnancy test pack: the appearance of an angel in the kitchen was rather more striking. And the news which this angel brought indicated still further that Mary was to bear a very special baby – he was to be the Son of God, no less! To avoid the fuss – negative and positive – which was likely to ensue, Mary went off up into the highlands of Judea, some way from Nazareth, and stayed out of the way with one of her relatives, Elizabeth. Elizabeth’s greeting of and blessing for Mary now confirmed that this was a real occasion for joy. And Mary cannot keep that joy to herself. She launches off into this amazing song which has been sung in the worship of the Church ever since. It begins, in the version we read, with “*My soul glorifies the Lord*”. In the older versions it is, “*My soul magnifies the Lord*” – she is, as we might say today, “bigging God up”. The Latin word which begins the song gives it the name by which this song is often known – *The Magnificat*. Eugene Peterson’s translation, *The Message*, puts it like this: “*I’m bursting with God-news*”. Mary is over the moon with it all and her first thought on hearing Elizabeth’s blessing of her is to praise God.

And the words she uses are very closely based on a song from her Scriptures, our Old Testament. When Hannah discovers in *1 Samuel 2* that, against all expectations, she is to be the mother of Samuel, she bursts forth in a song very similar indeed to Mary's. Mary would have heard that song read in the synagogue, if she had ever been, or maybe recited in her home. The influence is clear, but the feelings are nonetheless heartfelt and personal to Mary herself.

She glorifies God, delighted that he has remembered her. She acknowledges that she is of humble stock, so is even more overjoyed that God has deigned to use her. He has done great things for her. But, as with so many of the songs that we come across in the Bible – not least the *Psalms* themselves – her gaze is very soon lifted away from herself to the God whom she believes is favouring her in this way. And she finds plenty of reasons to praise him that far transcend the simple gratitude that she has for her pregnancy.

This is a God who is **MERCIFUL**. The God who is behind her good news is a God who shows mercy to all – down through the generations. The very fact of her pregnancy is an example of his astounding mercy. The son whom she bears is to be a Saviour, to bring to men and women the hope of escape from the consequences of their actions. God had created a perfect world, a world in which harmony reigned between humanity and the created order, between humanity and their Creator. But that world had been tainted and distorted by the presence of evil. Things were no longer as God intended. The consequences of the selfish choices and wrong decisions made by men and women meant a future – particularly an eternal future – from which all hope had been sucked. That concerned God and he wanted to provide a way out of that spiral of despair. So Jesus was to be born – Jesus who would preach and teach about the Kingdom of God, God's restored creation. Jesus, who would demonstrate in his own actions what that Kingdom might look like – healing for the hurt, hope for the hopeless, a future for the despairing, love for the loveless. Jesus who would, in his cataclysmic death on the cross, exhaust the power of evil to spoil the lives of men and women. That was God's mercy – and Mary was to be the means by which that could happen. No wonder she was singing!

And this is a God who is **JUST**. The effect of sin and evil on God's good creation was to skew things in favour of the selfish and the scheming. So some people became proud and arrogant. Some people used their skills and position to further their own ends rather than to share the resources that God had intended to be shared equitably. In his mercy – his desire to set things to right, back to the "factory settings" if you like – God would level things out. His justice would be a hallmark of this coming Kingdom. No-one would prosper at the expense of the poor and the weak. What God had created would be shared out for the good of all.

And this wouldn't simply be a heartless levelling out, with everyone therefore having to lose out. Because this is a God who is **GENEROUS**. He lifts up the humble, the disadvantaged and abused, the ignored and overlooked. And he fills the hungry with good things. He is a God who lavishes his care on us, who is prodigal with his resources, who wants people to have life and have it to the full. He'd been promising that for centuries – to Abraham and his family, to the generations since then who might have wondered just when God was going to act.

Now he proves that he is a God who **KEEPS HIS PROMISES**. He hadn't forgotten what he'd said. He was just waiting until the time was right, until his plan could really come together. Now he has told Mary that she is to give birth to a humanity-Saviour, to a world-Redeemer, to a Kingdom-bringer. He has remembered to be merciful. Not that he'd ever really forgotten, of course. But now his promise is fulfilled.

And that is still the case. God is still merciful and just and generous. The promises he has made he will keep. Anyone who wants to, can experience all that as they take seriously what Jesus said and did. Jesus not only died on the cross to empty evil of its power, but he was brought back to life as God vindicated his message and his ministry. That was, if you like, the final seal on the promises of God. There is the prospect of life in his Kingdom for all who want to take up the invitation. Our God is a faithful God. He kept his promise to Mary and she rejoiced in song. He keeps his promises to us and we, too, can rejoice in his astonishing grace and goodness. This Advent, this Christmas is as good a time as any to be doing that.

We've rejoiced here this morning over the birth of little Logan. There's even more to rejoice in over the birth of Jesus – just as Mary was able to express in her timeless song..