

ADVENT 4C 19-12-2021 *The Reverend Lorna Green* Micah 5:2-5a; (Song of Mary APBA 31);
Hebrews 10:5-10; Luke 1:39-45

Song of Mary

My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord:
my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour,
Who has looked with favour on his lowly servant:
from this day all generations will call me blessed;
The Almighty has done great things for me:
and holy is his name.
God has mercy on those who fear him:
from generation to generation.
The Lord has shown strength with his arm:
and scattered the proud in their conceit,
Casting down the mighty from their thrones:
and lifting up the lowly.
God has filled the hungry with good things:
and sent the rich away empty.
He has come to the aid of his servant Israel:
to remember the promise of mercy,
The promise made to our forebears:
to Abraham and his children for ever.
Glory to God; Father, Son, and Holy Spirit;
as in the beginning, so now, and for ever. Amen.

Here we are, on the last Sunday of Advent, the last Sunday before Christmas. The children have finished school for the year; holidays are being planned; many people are madly shopping and wrapping and cooking and arranging, and our whole focus seems to be on that one day- Christmas Day. We want it to be perfect, and lovely, and memorable, and we work hard to make it so.

Our Christmas preparations couldn't be more UN-like the lead-up to first Christmas, and Jesus' birth. The only similarity perhaps is in the waiting, the anticipation; maybe that should be our focus.

For hundreds of years the Jewish people had waited for the birth of the Saviour, the one who would be like the great King David, who would free them from the Romans and turn the world upside-down.

The Prophet Micah tells us that the saviour will be born in Bethlehem, the insignificant little town where David was born.

But there is a hint that this king will be different- he will be "the one of peace", whereas David was a warrior king. His reign was about power and conquering enemies; the new king's reign will be about justice and peace and love.

The letter to the Hebrews reminds us that Jesus would give his life out of love for humanity and bring an end to the need for animal sacrifice, which was only required so that people could offer something to God in penitence for their sins.

Jesus would not live to a ripe old age, unlike his ancestor David; he would not have umpteen wives, concubines, and children; he would not command an army, build a grand palace, or do the things people would expect of a king. But he would turn the world upside down.

The reading from Luke's Gospel begins after Mary had been visited by the angel Gabriel and told she was going to have a baby boy. Mary went to visit Elizabeth, who was also miraculously expecting a baby after years of childless marriage to the priest Zechariah.

Elizabeth's baby would grow up to be John the Baptist, the last Old Testament prophet.

He must have been a child prodigy because he gave his first 'prophecy' before he was even born: he recognised the tiny baby Mary was carrying and leapt for joy in Elizabeth's womb. The Holy Spirit enabled Elizabeth to recognise what was happening and she acknowledged Mary as the mother of her Lord. So Elizabeth was a prophet as well, and even though as a childless priest's wife she was all but worthless in the eyes of her community, she was chosen by God to play a very special part in the Good News story. Mary was even more marginalised, as an unwed, pregnant young girl; she wasn't anyone important, unlike King David's wives who were princesses or from wealthy, influential families. Mary was just a peasant girl, but God chose her to be blessed among women.

Then Mary sang her song, which we said in place of a psalm today. We call it the Magnificat because that is the first word of the Latin translation. It is magnificent, a song for the ages: it proclaims the topsy-turvy world of God's future, in which the hungry will be fed and the lowly lifted up. We may be so familiar with Mary's song that we forget how subversive it is. It has been banned in the past by oppressive governments that recognised its radical nature. During the British rule in India, singing the Magnificat in church was prohibited; during the 1980s, the government of Guatemala found Mary's words so revolutionary that they banned its public use; and so did the governments of Argentina and El Salvador. These dictatorships were nervous that their oppressed subjects might be encouraged to rise up against their evil empires by singing Mary's song. After all, the song looks forward to the powerful being brought down from their thrones; the rich being sent away empty; and the proud being scattered.

This is God's upside-down world, the kingdom Jesus preached, in which the mighty are brought down and the powerless lifted up. Mary's song is a threat to any hierarchy, and in fact she embodies the promises she sings of. She is one of the lowly ones: and she has been lifted up to be the mother of God. Mary is the messenger and the message, as she declares good news for the poor.

She sings of a God who brings down the powerful, who lifts up the lowly, who fills the hungry with good things. Strangely, wonderfully, Mary sings of a God who not only will do these things, but who has done these things. She sings as if God has already accomplished the redemption and restoration of the world. Mary sings of God's topsy-turvy world, in which an insignificant person like her can become the mother of the world's saviour. Her song paints a picture of a radically different way of being: the way of Christ, which is the way of unconditional love and acceptance, inclusion, welcome, and the fulfilment of God's promise.

For most people in our society, Christmas is a nice reason for a bit of a holiday, the fun of exchanging presents and a lot of rich food. We like to get sentimental about the baby Jesus and the Holy Family, conveniently ignoring the fact that Mary and Joseph were forced by a dictator to travel to Bethlehem. We forget that they were displaced persons, with nowhere to stay, just ordinary people at the mercy of decisions made by the rich and powerful. We forget the dangers they faced.

As she waited, Mary looked forward a future she would not see. She knew her baby would be the fulfilment of God's promise, and she lived in hope, confident in God's goodness.

We live in hope, too: we want the world to be as God intended it to be. We want peace on earth, food for the hungry, strength for the weak, and healing for the sick.

We do our best to follow Jesus and play our part in loving our neighbours, doing what we can to change the world- one act of kindness at a time.

Today we re-tell and remember this human-sized story of two unlikely women that prepares us for the grand, history-changing story of the birth that is to come. Today is a day to join their laughter and astonishment as a young, unwed, pregnant, and marginalised woman proclaims the most important prophetic words in scripture.

As we wait to celebrate the birth of Jesus, we remember Mary, Elizabeth and all who have watched and waited, and continue to watch and wait for the kingdom. We give thanks for their faithfulness and pray that we might follow their examples of patient hope.