

08/12/13

GSM

Luke 1:26-38, 46-56

[*read*]

Shortly after Jo and I got married in 1994, we moved into a maisonette just north of Well Street Common in Hackney. For most of our time there the person who lived below us in the basement flat was an East End guy called Dave. We got on pretty well and he was nice and quiet, but around mid-October, before the clocks had even been put back, we would begin to hear this through our floorboards: [*play track*]. And so would begin two and a half months of “Now that’s what I call Christmas” or “The best Christmas album in the world ever!” or whatever it was called. For those two and a half months he was simply having a wonderful Christmas time. He wished it could be Christmas every day, when the bells are ringing and the band begins to play. And play. And play. Have you ever had the experience of liking a piece of music so much that you play it to death and then find that you can no longer listen to it? Well, can I tell you that the moment when you can no longer listen to it comes a bit earlier if you never really liked it in the first place?

There are many things that remind you, as if you need reminding, that Christmas is approaching, and the appearance of Christmas songs is one of them. You can’t go into a department store without being assaulted by Mistletoe and Wine. Lift journeys are accompanied by singers dreaming of a white Christmas. But of course it’s not just secular songs. This is the season of the *Christmas carol*. Christmas carols do funny things to you and those around you.

This is a picture of my Mum with two random children.



[Whoever said the 70s were the decade that taste forgot?] My mother was and is a wonderful gentle and kind Christian woman. But she would *snarl* at you if you made any sort of noise in the kitchen whilst the radio was on at 3pm on Christmas Eve, for that was when the radio broadcast of 9 lessons and carols from Kings College Cambridge began with a boy chorister singing the first verse of Once in Royal David's City solo. There was something about Christmas carols that she particularly loved. For me, many of you know that I have a deep loathing for many Christmas carols, though I have heard the words "humbug" and "Mr Grumpy" enough times to know to keep my well-informed and accurate prejudice to myself.

We're beginning a series of three talks this morning on Christmas songs. Not, you'll be happy to hear, anything by Cliff, Jonny Mathis or Boney M, and none of the Christmas carols either. No, what we're going to look at are the three songs reported in the Christmas story as having been sung by some of the figures that feature in it. This morning we're looking at Mary's song, next week Wendy is speaking on the song of Zechariah a little further on in Luke 1, and the week after that at the all age service Malcolm is speaking on the song of the angels to the shepherds. Not a little donkey in sight. Just three situations where people respond in song.

So, Mary's song. What we'll look at today are two things we learn from Mary's song – firstly, we'll see how Mary is an example for us to follow, and secondly we'll look at what we learn about God from Mary's song.

So, first, how we learn from Mary's example. Let's consider the situation she was in. She was promised in marriage, which in those days would have meant she would have been quite young, around maybe 16 years old. A young woman in first century Israeli society was not in a powerful position. She is visited by an angel who tells her she is highly favoured, and she will become pregnant, not by sleeping with her future husband, but by the Holy Spirit. Her child will be the promised one who will reign over God's people for ever. Now, put yourself in her position. How are you feeling? I would imagine a mish-mash of different things – you've got adrenaline flowing through all your veins, I imagine, at the thought that *your son* would be the Messiah long awaited. But equally, you're thinking, what happens when my bump starts to show? Who's going to believe me that I am pregnant by the Holy Spirit? Everyone's going to think that Joseph and I have jumped the gun. What's Joseph going to think? When you were engaged in those days, then any sex with another man counted as adultery, and adultery carried the death penalty. It says elsewhere in the Bible that Joseph, when he found out about Mary's pregnancy, planned to divorce her quietly – it's clear that her situation as a pregnant unmarried woman would have put Mary in a situation of risk and disgrace.

How does Mary respond? She sings. But not only does she sing – her song is an exuberant one and one where the whole of Mary is unified in the song she sings. Do you see that from verses 46 and 47? “My *soul* glorifies the Lord, and *my spirit* rejoices in God my Saviour”. Maybe sometimes we can sing in a way that is disengaged from where we're actually at. Our mouths are singing a hymn of praise but our thoughts and longings are elsewhere. Here Mary is totally committed in what she is singing. In terms of content, the form her song takes is interesting – it goes from praising God for her own particular situation, then extends to what she knows about God, then extends to what she knows of God from the Scriptures.

I'd like to suggest that Mary here serves as a great example for us to follow. Now, Mary responded in song, and I am not suggesting that we all go around like characters in a bad musical singing to each other "*I had a great day today*" or "*Thanks for praying for my friend – he is feeling a lot better*". [Well, you can if you want.] But mostly I think we can learn how to turn our situations to God in praise.

The first thing that Mary does is to personalise her praise. Verse 48 and 49: "He has been mindful of the humble state of his servant. From now on all generations will call me blessed, for the Mighty One has done great things for me-- holy is his name." The angel tells Mary that she has found favour with God and that her son will rule for ever, and Mary turns this promise into a hymn of praise sung from the soul and spirit. Her joy is not *intellectual* joy but *experienced* joy – it comes from what she actually feels.

How can we praise God in a way that our soul and spirit is singing along with our voices? By following Mary's example and having some personal investment in what we are singing or saying to God. I came across a striking example of someone having personal investment in something when I heard a talk at the end of last year from Colin Moynihan, who was the Chairman of the British Olympic Association. He was asked a question after his talk about what his favourite moment was of the London Olympic Games. Guesses for what he said? He said this: in 2009 he was in Sydney with a group of athletes and one of them, Chris Meares, a diver, fell ill just before the gala dinner thrown by the Australian Olympic Association. It soon became clear that he was very ill and the doctors only gave him a 30% chance of getting through the evening. His parents were contacted, but were in different continents and took a long time to arrive. Moynihan, being a parent, stayed with Chris Meares through the night, and he eventually recovered. His favourite moment of the games was seeing Chris Meares compete in the springboard final, where he came ninth. Now, on the face of it, look at a British competitor coming ninth and you think, well done, better luck next time getting a medal. But for Colin Moynihan, he had personal investment in it. More than Jessica Ennis, Mo Farah, Chris Hoy, Andy Murray, Katherine Grainger, his moment was Chris Meares competing and coming ninth.

How do we follow Mary's example? By having personal investment in our praises to God. You don't usually praise God with your soul and spirit for something he does in the abstract, you praise him in that way for what he has done *for you*. We praise God from our soul and spirit when we realise what God has done for us, how he has rescued us and blessed us. For mankind, yes, but specifically for you and me. Think on this - where would I be without God? What hope would I have in this life if not for the hope of the life to come? So do we personalise the gospel? Or is the gospel something that no longer excites us such that when we sing praise there is a disconnect between our mouth and our spirit? Let's personalise it, and understand how the gospel has made us right before God in a way that it entirely impossible otherwise. That's why we share Holy Communion - to remember what God has done for us. That's one of the reasons we read the Bible together in small groups – to remember what God has done for us. And from that praise will follow.

What Mary does next in her song is to turn the spotlight away from us and towards God and what he has done. Verses 50 to 53: "His mercy extends to those who fear him, from generation to generation. He has performed mighty deeds with his arm; he has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts. He has brought down rulers from their thrones but has lifted up the humble. He has filled the hungry with good things but has sent the rich away empty." Mary knows God and can place her own personal situation and blessing from God into a context of how God is. Mary is in a humble situation; she praises God who lifts up the humble. Mary knows God well enough to be able to praise God for who he is.

Can we do the same? If we have an experience of God's intervention in our life, can we place it in the context of who God is and what he has done? There's a risk if we don't that we end up jumping to the wrong conclusions. If God blesses us with a gift of money, there's a risk that we conclude that God is all about giving us money. If God blesses us with academic success then we may conclude that God will always give us top grades. But if we're able to place our circumstances in the light of what the Bible tells us about God then we can have a right view of God and a more realistic expectation as to how God will move in our life in the future. The more we know God, the better we understand how he is likely to deal with us.

Finally, Mary turns to God's salvation plan. Verses 54 and 55: "He has helped his servant Israel, remembering to be merciful to Abraham and his descendants forever, just as he promised our ancestors". Mary ends her song with the big picture. This is about the fulfilment of the promise to Abraham that God made back in Genesis, of making him into a great nation and giving him possession of the land of his enemies. Mary's perspective is founded in the promises of God to save and to bless.

Again, there is a lesson in this for us. Mary realises that the promises made to Abraham reach their fulfilment in Jesus. For us the gospel of Jesus's death and resurrection is not just a historical fact which gives us entry into heaven, but is a means of living that must inform whatever we do. The pattern of death leading to resurrection is one that runs throughout the pages of the New Testament, and through the experience of Christians the world over. Christians experience a thousand deaths in their life – of giving up promotions at work, of turning aside from cherished but destructive habits, of scorn and hurt and of course, for many Christians, of being put to death for their faith. By understanding these in the context of the gospel of death and resurrection, we know that the day of resurrection will follow the day of death, and in some way that God makes the pains we suffer for him enhance our glory. It says in Corinthians that our troubles today are *achieving* for us a glory that outweighs them all. We can have hope if we apply the gospel to our situation. Mary did so in her joy. We can do so in our joy or sorrow.

Mary can teach us how to sing to God. But what does the song teach us about God? Well, look again at verse 51 to 53: "He has performed mighty deeds with his arm; he has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts. He has brought down rulers from their thrones but has lifted up the humble. He has filled the hungry with good things but has sent the rich away empty." This is pretty strong stuff. Maybe this is the reason why during the British rule of India, Mary's song was prohibited from being sung in church. In the 1980s, Guatemala's government discovered Mary's words about God's preferential love for the poor to be too dangerous and revolutionary. The song had been creating quite the stirring amongst

Guatemala's impoverished masses. Mary's words were inspiring the Guatemalan poor to believe that change was indeed possible. Thus their government banned any public recitation of Mary's words. Similarly, after the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo—whose children all disappeared during the Dirty War—placed Mary's words on posters throughout the capital plaza, the military powers of Argentina outlawed any public display of Mary's song. Bit of a difference from your usual Christmas songs isn't it? I'm not aware that *Away in a Manger* has ever been prohibited by any government fearful of its people.

Is Mary's song true when it speaks of God humbling the powerful and lifting the humble? Well, consider this. When Jesus came into the world, the established social and religious order was like this [*use pool cue*]. On the top were the religious leaders, the high priests, the Pharisees and Sadducees. They would lead people in their worship of God. One of them would once a year enter into God's presence in the Holy of Holies in the temple. Then there were the ordinary folk – the tradesmen, the farmers and so on. At the bottom were the dirty people, those who were despised – the prostitutes, the lepers, the tax collectors, the Roman oppressors. What does Jesus do? [*turn pool cue over*]. He completely overturns the established order. When you read many of the gospel stories and you see the word Pharisee or Sadducee, you know that here are the bad guys, the ones intent on undoing Jesus's work. He calls them “whitewashed tombs” – clean on the outside and dirty on the inside - and calls down woe on them. And who does Jesus praise? A Roman soldier whose faith, he says, is the greatest in Israel. A tax collector who had to climb a tree to see Jesus. He even calls a tax collector to be part of his inner circle. A prostitute who anoints his feet with perfume. He touches the lepers, he delivers the demon-possessed.

Do you feel left out, marginalized and oppressed? Christmas is your time. Here we have a young girl who is forced to travel 70 miles by the authorities to Bethlehem whilst pregnant, who gives birth in a stable. Has anyone been in a working stable? It's not like this:-



Why would it be light like that – why would any first century farmer waste fuel on lighting where the animals slept? Why would it be clean and cuddly? Has anyone actually visited a working stable? If you visit a stable then you'll realize that at night it would be dark, smelly and noisy. I don't know how many of you have nativity scenes at home – maybe you're about to get them out this weekend, maybe you've already done so. My favourite character in the nativity appears in the Spanish version of it and is the *caganer*. Does anyone know what he is doing in the nativity? This picture might give you a clue:-





I love the idea that in the nativity scene there is someone taking a dump because it undermines the sentimentality of Christmas. Jesus was born amidst *filth*, where the risk of infection must have been sky-high and the risk of damage to the baby by animals munching at him in their manger must have played on Mary and Joseph's mind. This is how God comes down – in humility, poverty and danger. Amidst defecating animals and humans. That feels a bit discordant at Christmas time doesn't it? Could it be that we've sanitized it out of all proportion?

If you are here and feeling on the outside this morning, not as respectable or sorted as others then listen to Mary's song. God has brought down rulers from their thrones but has lifted up the humble. He has filled the hungry with good things but has sent the rich away empty. The television adverts will tell you that those in favour at Christmas are those who have the money to buy the flashiest presents or buy the biggest turkey. The Bible says the opposite. Those that God favours are the humble. The angels sing to shepherds, not to princes. Jesus is born in squalor, not in comfort.

So this Christmas don't let the sugary sentimentality of the commercial western Christmas blind us to what is really going on. A vulnerable young woman received an extraordinary blessing from God 2000 years ago and turned it to praise. We have received blessing through the coming of Jesus and his death and resurrection; this should drive us to praise. Let Mary's song inform our praise of God this Christmas, the one who exalts the humble and humbles the proud. Let her example of praise inform our own praises.