

St Marc, Grenoble

Sunday 19th December 2021 (Advent 4)

Micah 5: 2 - 5a

Luke 1: 39 - 56

'My soul Magnifies'

Good morning, welcome to everyone, both here in St Marc's and those joining on Zoom - **PRAY**

Who can tell me which Sunday this is, in the church calendar?... and what is that remarkable piece of music? (Johann Sebastian Bach's interpretation of Magnificat written around the beginning of 18C)

Today is the last Sunday of Advent, a time of anticipation, preparation – a sense of joyful expectancy, looking forward in hope to a new future.

This morning's Gospel story is at the very heart of Advent. We hear it every year – reminding us that Christmas is approaching. But, it can be easy to miss the significance of this remarkable story, because it's so familiar. Let's take a more careful look at this reading, a large part of which is known as 'The Magnificat' - Mary's own wonderful hymn of praise; probably the most famous ancient Christian hymn of praise and commitment.

In our difficult world, joyful expectancy is often coloured with at least a tinge of apprehension, wondering what will happen next; and I expect a lot of us are feeling that way just now, which I'm sure is a little similar to what Mary was feeling shortly before the birth of her child

To put it in context, earlier in this chapter of Luke, We're told "God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth...to a virgin whose name was Mary." Gabriel was no ordinary messenger, he was God's special envoy; he had a special message for a young girl, who was probably only about 14 years old.

What was going through her mind?? v. 29 is a classic understatement: "She was disturbed at this, and wondered what such a greeting might mean". More like "What on earth is happening?!", and probably also "Why me?" Not surprisingly, Mary was terrified; but the angel reassured her. "Don't be afraid Mary, you're in favour with God"

It was every Jewish woman's dream to give birth to the Messiah; but, Mary was simply not prepared for what the angel said next: "You will conceive in your womb and will have a son; and you shall call his name Jesus. He will be a great man, and he'll be called the son of the Most High..." The name Jesus means literally "Yaweh will save" or "Saviour" – in other words the Messiah!

Mary's response was totally innocent, "How will this happen? I'm still a virgin?"

Well, the angel dealt with that one – “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. For that reason, the holy one who is born from you will be called God’s Son.”

Then, as if by way of confirmation of God’s power – he added: “Let me tell you this too, your cousin Elizabeth, in her old age, has also conceived a son. This is the sixth month for her, a woman who people used to say was barren. With God you see nothing is impossible.”

There’s so much in those few words. - Can you imagine the turmoil in this young girl’s mind? First, the potential shame of having a child outside marriage, – especially as she was already half-married to Joseph. That’s not unusual these days; but, then, it was considered equivalent to adultery – and women were stoned to death for adultery.

Second, the incredible privilege of bearing the Messiah, – which was every Jewish woman’s dream.

Third, the unbelievable news that her relative, Elizabeth, who had been considered barren, was also pregnant. Unbelievable, because it was an awful stigma for a Jewish woman to be barren.

Mary can only have been stunned. A reasonable reaction may have been: “What on earth have I done to upset God?” Yet, remarkably, Mary’s response was total submission to God’s will. “I am the Lord’s servant; may it be to me as you have said.”

God worked wonders with her human frailty. This is one of the most amazing stories of the New Testament, God chose to use this simple young girl, from a poor backwater of a village, to change the entire course of history, bringing the Saviour, the provider of our eternal salvation, into this world.

Certainly if Mary’s story embraces potential scandal, her response is an amazing example of obedience to God’s will; something for us all to learn!

She may have been terrified by the responsibility. But, by His grace, she was able to accept the task God had prepared for her, in faithful obedience. The angel told Mary she was highly favoured, and would bear a king; but that could only happen if she gave herself obediently in response to God’s call.

As we heard in our Gospel reading, which includes Mary’s song, the Magnificat, Mary completely opened herself to God’s will. And, because of her openness God worked wonders with her human frailty.

As if to find encouragement and support, and possibly also to get away from potential criticism in her home surroundings, prompted by the Angel's comments, Mary went to stay with her relative Elizabeth (possibly a cousin) who lived several days' journey from Nazareth; where, as we heard in our reading, she was greeted with delight and affirmation by the cousin who seems to have become something of a mentor.

Mary came to stay for three months. Most commentators indicate that Mary left before John was born; but one writer suggests that Mary came to act as midwife for Elizabeth – that's a lovely story, but there doesn't seem to be anything in the scripture which either confirms, or denies that. But it does seem logical that Mary went to Elizabeth's to avoid the inevitable gossip.

The minute Mary arrived, Elizabeth's baby leapt in her womb and she instantly knew what was happening. Many men would say that was feminine intuition, but we're told categorically that she was filled with the Holy Spirit.

A wonderful bond obviously developed between them – they probably both felt that the other was the only woman on earth with whom they could share their experiences, and their hopes and fears, and be understood.

Elizabeth was a lot older than Mary, it seems that she was around sixty or sixty five; while it has been suggested that Mary could have been as young as thirteen, so it's likely that Elizabeth was a wonderful support for Mary, at what was undoubtedly a very difficult time for her, at least socially.

This is one of the most amazing stories of the New Testament, and one we, so often, rush past. God used this young girl, from a poor backwater of a village, to change the entire course of history, bringing the Saviour – the provider of our eternal salvation, into this world.

Her response to God's call is an amazing example of obedience to His will, which is a precious object lesson for us all.

So, as this Advent draws towards the climax of our saviour's birth, as we prepare to celebrate the wonder and joy of Christmas, let's consider the challenge, the promise and encouragement there is, in this story, for all of us. In response, perhaps we should ask God to use every one of us for His glory, in whatever way He chooses.

Because as the angel said: **“Nothing is impossible with God.”**

Let's Pray