

Sermon Given by

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At the Morning Services on 13<sup>th</sup> December 2009

### Luke 1:39-56 - "Magnificat!"

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I was reminded while I was preparing this week of a very helpful distinction made by the well-known preacher of last century, Martyn Lloyd-Jones. He was highlighting the difference between advice and news.

Advice is counsel about something which hasn't yet happened and about which you can do something. News, by contrast, is information about something which has already happened and to which therefore you cannot contribute.

Lloyd-Jones illustrated that with the example of a king fighting against an invading army. Before the invasion, advice is what the king's people need: guidance on how they can save themselves.. But if the king defeats his enemy, then the messengers go far and wide throughout the land with news: good news of victory won.

We are bombarded with advice at Christmas, from many different quarters: the government gives us guidelines for safe drinking; advertisers make suggestions about the perfect present; supermarkets about the perfect Christmas lunch and the post office tells us all about last posting dates.

But advice is markedly absent from God when it comes to Christmas. The nature of his communication now and 2000 years ago is news. An announcement of an event in which we are the blessed beneficiaries and to which he contributes everything and we contribute nothing. Christmas is all about news.

We've seen that already in our series because the busiest character in the first two stories in Luke's gospel was... an angel – the messenger who isn't there to dispense advice but to make announcement: in this case birth announcements to Zechariah and to Mary. And those birth announcements are a proclamation of God's liberating invasion of planet earth. He uses human beings in that invasion, sure – but it is all his doing and at his initiative.

I want us to trace out two aspects of that in our passage today:

**God's news confirmed** (which happens when Mary visits her cousin Elisabeth) in verses 39-45 and then **God's news celebrated** (when Mary bursts into praise) in verses 46-55.

So first then God's news is confirmed. If you cast your mind back to last week, we looked back to the angel's visit to Mary. I suppose it was amazing enough that the angel told her that she would become pregnant while still a virgin – but even more amazing was what the angel said about the baby: he will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High.

2000 years of familiarity with the story means that the force of it is blunted for us, but for Mary as she hears those words, surely, it is enough to blow the mind. Although I did come across one account of a Nativity play which had perhaps come closer to what Mary was feeling than we imagine.

It was reported by a school inspector, Gervase Finn, about a school he visited in the Yorkshire Dales: Mary a pretty girl of 6 or 7 was bustling about the stage wiping and dusting when a tall pale boy with a crooked tinsel halo came in, wiped his nose on his sleeve, glanced around suspiciously and sidled up to Mary like a dodgy market trader. "Who are you?" Mary asked sharply putting down her duster and placing her hands on her hips. (Not the quiet gentle Mary I had been used to.)

"I'm the angel Gabriel". "Well what do you want?" "Are you Mary?" "Yes." "You're having a baby." "I'm not." "You are." "Who says?" "God and He sent me to tell you." "Well I don't know nothing about this." "And it will be a boy and He will become great and be called Son of the Most High." "What if it's a girl?" "It won't be." "You don't know. It might be." "It won't because God knows about these things." "Oh." "And you will call him Jesus." "I don't like the name Jesus. Can I call him something else?" "No." "What about Gavin?"

"No" the angel snapped. "You have to call it Jesus, otherwise you don't get it." "All right then. I don't know what I'm going to tell Joseph." "Tell him it's God's." When the angel of the Lord had departed Joseph came in dressed in a brown woollen dressing gown with a multi-coloured towel over his head. "Hello Mary." "Oh hello." "Have you had a good day?" "Yes, pretty good." "Have you anything to tell me?" A pause. "I am having a baby – oh and it's not yours."

There's nothing like a bit of Yorkshire realism: because even if it goes someway beyond the details in the Bible's account, surely it conveys something of the bolt from the blue which Mary must have been feeling.

A woman who has lived through the experience of a positive pregnancy test will be able to tell others of the amazing array of feelings as they see the blue line appear: and surely an angelic pregnancy announcement would bring just as much of an upheaval to the emotions.

So don't let's imagine that Mary made her response in verse 38 with a beatific, placid expression on her face and her hands folded. ***'I am the Lord's servant. May it be to me as you have said.'*** (Any more than when Jesus prayed '***your will be done***', in the Garden of Gethsemane, it was an easy prayer for him to pray).

But the angel had given Mary a very gracious encouragement in his message, by telling her about Elisabeth's pregnancy – because if she went to her cousin and she was indeed pregnant she would instantly find confirmation of the angel's message. And in fact the corroboration was more than she could ever have anticipated. Let me read from verse 39:

***<sup>39</sup>At that time Mary got ready and hurried to a town in the hill country of Judea, <sup>40</sup>where she entered Zechariah's home and greeted Elizabeth.***

***<sup>41</sup>When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the baby leaped in her womb, and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. <sup>42</sup>In a loud voice she exclaimed: "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the child you will bear! <sup>43</sup>But why am I so favoured, that the mother of my Lord should come to me? <sup>44</sup>As soon as the sound of your greeting***

***reached my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy. <sup>45</sup>Blessed is she who has believed that what the Lord has said to her will be accomplished!"***

Do you see how that episode would have confirmed the news that Mary had heard from the angel. It wasn't just that her aged cousin Elisabeth was pregnant – as Gabriel had told her.

It was what Elisabeth actually said which would have encouraged her. And Luke is careful to point out that the words were from God: she was filled with the Holy Spirit as she spoke.

So Mary hears from her cousin's lips that amazing title applied to her: the Mother of my Lord. She's acknowledging that in some amazing way Mary will carry within her the one who made the universe.

And almost in confirmation of that supremely special baby there was the reaction of the unborn baby in Elisabeth's womb at Mary's arrival: as Elisabeth put it: ***'the baby in my womb leaped for joy'***.

This is, by the way, one of a number of verses in the Bible which could be used in the debate about when human life begins – because it implies, I think, that personality predates birth. In fact one of the commentators has called this scene strikingly, not the meeting of two mothers, but the meeting of two babies.

In his life, John the Baptist would be the fore-runner of Jesus and it would be his joy and his privilege to tell people how he was nothing and how Jesus was everything. And as he would grow up to be in his life, so here before he was even born, the forerunner jumps for joy at the thought of Jesus coming into the world. John the Baptist knew his place before Jesus and he was thrilled with anticipation even before he was born.

That must have confirmed to Mary the significance of the message she had heard.

Just as a footnote before we move on, when we feel non-plussed or stressed out, often God's way of bringing reassurance to us will be through another believer. It's quite likely that the times when we least want to seek out Christian encouragement, and the thought of fighting our way to church is more than we can cope with – or the effort to meet up with the home group or prayer triplet: it is quite likely that that is exactly the time when we need to go along. And allow God to use them to encourage and help us. That's what Mary did: and the result was that God's news was confirmed...

Then a second heading: God's news celebrated.

Because that is surely what happens in verses 46-55. Initially it is at a personal level that the celebration happens. So let me read verses 46-49.

***<sup>46</sup>And Mary said: "My soul glorifies the Lord  
<sup>47</sup>and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,  
<sup>48</sup>for he has been mindful  
of the humble state of his servant.  
From now on all generations will call me blessed,  
<sup>49</sup>for the Mighty One has done great things for me—  
holy is his name***

Luther once commented that the essence of Christianity lies in the use of personal pronouns – and these words are a good example: **My** soul glorifies the Lord and **my** spirit rejoices in God **my** Saviour.

Mary knew that God was her Saviour and rescuer and she made her own response to that, praising him and celebrating his salvation. It wasn't that she was humble and God had noticed that and rewarded her. It was more that she had had a humble **state** or life situation and that God had still bothered with her – young, female, not very well-off. But he had showed a **personal** interest in her and she responds in heartfelt **personal** praise. You may perhaps feel that you are not worthy of God's notice but he is the God who comes down to our level there is no-one so low down that he cannot love them and reach them.

Having said that, let me add that becoming a Christian is never like catching the flu: where you just wake up one day and you have it, who knows how. It is a personal relationship where God saves me and I respond in praise and adoration. And if the language of personal praise never crosses your lips, then it probably means that you do not know God as your Saviour yet.

Communion today would be a great time for all of us to re-iterate what Mary said: the Mighty one has done great things for me: sending Jesus to be knit together in Mary's womb then into the world and then on to the cross to die for our sins. Praise him for that today even if it is the very first time you do so!

From that point on the poem moves outward to describe God's mercy on others as well as on Mary. The general principle is expressed in verse 50: ***<sup>50</sup>His mercy extends to those who fear him, from generation to generation.***

Hold on to that general principle, because it clarifies who receives the mercy of God. It is those who fear him; those who respond as Mary did in verse 38: ***I am the Lord's servant.***

William Temple was one of the Archbishops of Canterbury last century and he once advised someone who was opposing the end of British Rule in India not to read the Magnificat, because, he said, 'it is a very revolutionary poem'. In other words, if you read this you might come to the conclusion that God is always against mighty empires, and for the liberation of the masses – with no qualifications and no questions asked.

But that is to overlook verse 50. His mercy extends to those who fear him – not to all the oppressed minorities of the world whether they fear him or not. This is a response of praise from a believing heart to God's acts on behalf of his people.

So that is the general principle to hold in mind as we read verse 51-5.

***<sup>51</sup>He has performed mighty deeds with his arm;  
he has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts.***

***<sup>52</sup>He has brought down rulers from their thrones  
but has lifted up the humble.***

***<sup>53</sup>He has filled the hungry with good things  
but has sent the rich away empty.***

***<sup>54</sup>He has helped his servant Israel,  
remembering to be merciful***

**<sup>55</sup>to Abraham and his descendants forever,  
even as he said to our fathers."**

What strikes me in that is the way it is all in the past tense. Why does Mary say he has performed mighty deeds with his arm; he has scattered the proud; he has lifted the humble, filled the hungry and sent the rich away empty.

It isn't just that she is pondering all that God has done in the past – humbling proud rulers like Pharaoh in Egypt or Nebuchadnezzar who looked from his Palace over all his land and said aren't I fantastic. She isn't just remembering how God lifted up humble people like Hannah, the mother of Samuel, another miraculous conception – or fed his people in the wilderness as they left Egypt.

It makes more sense to see Mary's words as what is called a prophetic past. The news she has heard from the angel about her son having a kingdom which will never end is so certain to happen that it is as good as done. Proud people will be humbled and humble people will be lifted up. God has spoken and the outcome is certain.

The mention of Abraham makes exactly that point, because Abraham was the one who heard the promises originally. And now not a second late and not a moment early the promise was being fulfilled. The great descendant of Abraham was being born – and as soon as that happens, then there is no doubting where history is heading. It is heading towards his universal rule where those who bow the knee to him are blessed, just as Mary has been blessed and those who oppose him will inevitably be flattened.

Do you see therefore the angels message is **news**: It's the proclamation of a victory: God's task force into enemy occupied planet earth has come and the outcome is certain.

I wonder if we believe that. Too often we are robbed of confidence that it is so, by our feeble post-modern attitude that we just can't be sure. A clergyman was chatting about spiritual things to an air stewardess the other day and his heart sank when he she retreated to that common smokescreen response. 'You can't be sure of anything any more.' And it wasn't the time for lengthy discussion so he simply said to her: I do hope the pilot doesn't share your philosophy.'

Because we do live our lives practically as if our actions had consequences and as if the future matters. And ever since Jesus Christ entered the world we can be 100% sure history has been moving remorselessly to only one conclusion: his uncontested victory. That message is news not advice and it places us in one or other of two groupings according to Mary's poem: either we are among **the proud**: saying to ourselves 'Who is Jesus, that I should bother with him?' or alongside Mary we celebrate the news as those who **are humble**, who say 'Who am I that Jesus should ever bother with me?'

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(All scripture quoted is from the New International Version of the Bible unless otherwise stated.)