



Advent: Somebody's Looking Through the Door
Rev Alan Jones
December 12, 2010
Luke 1:39-56, Isaiah 35:1-10

So what image comes into your mind when you think about a young teenage girl? Is there any group in the population whose ideas and attitudes are more easily dismissed than teenage girls? Mary proves us all wrong in our prejudices.

My suspicion is that, for most of us, it is difficult to imagine what kind of girl, or young woman Mary was. She was young. She was a servant or slave with no formal education, and yet, here in the opening of Luke's gospel we hear not only beautiful poetry, but radical social change. This is what is called the *Magnificat* in liturgical traditions. In the Anglican or Episcopal tradition this is read or sung every day, day in day out, year in year out; it is understood to be fundamental to the life of devotion and prayer. And yet, William Temple, one of the most famous Archbishops of Canterbury, warned his missionaries not to read it in India, for fear that it might foment revolution. Back in the 1980s the Guatemalan military prohibited its public reading because it was seen as a revolutionary manifesto.

So what would it mean for you and me if we read the Magnificat every day and made it our fervent prayer?

Who knows for use how much these are the actual words of the teenage Mary and how much they reflect the community for which Luke was writing. The Magnificat fits the message of Luke's gospel which consistently gives value and respect to those who are at the bottom of the social order. Even Jesus's ministry, in Luke's gospel, begins at the synagogue in Nazareth proclaiming Isaiah's message of good news for the poor, release for prisoners and sight for the blind.

On the other hand, Mary herself seems to have been devout in her faith, and these words fit in well with our knowledge about her. I am sure that Mary would have been well acquainted with Hannah's song upon which much of the Magnificat is based, a song born out of a great desire to be freed of the stigma of childlessness. Mary, facing parenthood all too early, may have sensed a connection with Hannah, who struggled with pregnancy for very different reasons before she gave birth to the prophet Samuel.

From all accounts, Mary was a strong-minded woman who freely spoke her mind. Methodists have long neglected the study of Mary, largely, I think, because of the devotion to her in Catholicism. She may have been the sweet and very beautiful woman depicted in Renaissance art, but she was clearly much more than that. She realized that in giving birth to this child, she was looking through a door to a new era of history, a new social and political and economic reality that would be nothing short of revolutionary. The Magnificat cannot be treated as simply a pretty religious song. It is so much more. Within it is the very heart of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

At the heart of Magnificat is a deep devotion to God. This is powerful. Notice she refers to God as her Savior. Traditionally the church has referred to Jesus as Savior, but here, Mary is recognizing that the God she knows, growing up in a devout Jewish home, is that God who is going to save her and her people. Let me remind you that, according to Luke, she has just heard the news that she is pregnant. Whether God is the father or whether it is her fiancé Joseph is not the question. The question is how does she survive socially? Before Roman occupation, news of such a pregnancy might well have led to her execution. For a girl in her early teens, the shame would be terrible. Yet Mary faces the shame with absolute courage and sees that she is being invited to take a role on the stage of God's history for the whole human family.

And Mary, in the company of her cousin, Elizabeth, is far from complaining. On the contrary her heart is filled with excitement and anticipation... so much so that she bursts into song, glorifying God. For this young woman has a deep trust in God that is rooted in the deeds done by God for her people. And, to her, God is not just power but goodness itself. To be caught up in the doings of God is to be blessed in Mary's eyes no matter what the cost to her. Sure, many will scorn her, but, for her, what matters is that she is part of God's plan for the human family.

Mary is a wonderful example to those of us who struggle to see what God is doing, those of us who are naturally tempted to take the safe option, or the easy way out. In her extraordinary courage we have much to learn from this teenage girl.

But still she leads us on the road of offence. She does not see God working to shore up the status quo with all its unfairness. She knows full well the realities of the world around her. The quiescent Herod, is on the throne. He is a cruel, sadistic man, who consistently acts to impress his Roman bosses and punish his own people. All around Mary, the rich are getting richer, and life is brutish for the poor. To its shame, the religious establishment questions little and reinforces cruelty and oppression targeted at poor people. People live in daily fear of Herod's secret police and swift Roman punishment.

It is against this background that Mary dares not only to dream, but to see an open doorway leading to revolutionary change. She knows that God is intervening in the world through the baby she will bear. And she is confident that the world will never be the same again. This baby is not simply going to start a new religious tribe with heaven guaranteed. No! This baby, amazingly, will bring the loving transformation of history. He comes to bring literally the Kingdom of God which will turn upside down the violence and oppression of her people.

So, please let's be careful with Christmas. There is nothing wrong with the Victorian sentimentality of the season, nothing wrong with Santa Claus, Rudolph and Frosty but they are a huge distraction from the message which Mary sings. What really matters at Christmas is surely what God is doing. The joy of Christmas is all about trusting God's promise to redeem creation, and Mary's song reveals the ultimate meaning of the incarnation that is growing within the space of her womb.

The message proclaimed is that the existing social order is under judgment. Listen once more to Mary's words;

He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. ⁵²He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; ⁵³he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty.

There is no ambiguity here... and it isn't about political parties or military domination. This is a glimpse through the door to a vision of Kingdom values, where peace, justice and mercy meet, where all are valued as precious children of God.

Traditionally on this third Sunday of Advent, not only do we read the story of Mary and the Magnificat but we also read the great words of the prophet Isaiah, and his vision of a great future. In Isaiah's words, we find the same unabated rejoicing in the work of our God that we find in Mary's great song.

Now we have the fact of oppression, the excruciating pain of broken hearts; Isaiah declares the advent of good news and the binding up of wounds.

Now there is talk of God's anger with his creation, but Isaiah announces that the year of the Lord's favor is at hand (the recent conference in Cancun notwithstanding).

Now men and women are racked with tears of mourning—Isaiah prophecies that they shall be adorned with garments of celebration.

Now we are faint with fear and despair, but Isaiah proclaims that we shall be reborn under the happy weight of the mantle of praise.

So, both Isaiah and Mary are giving us cause to hope as we look through the door to the future. We live in a world facing huge challenges. The global economy is struggling. The poverty gap is increasing, both within the United States and around the world. Environmental crisis means that our comfort now is building up a burden for future generations. And around us we see violence and war. We see scapegoating of people who are different.

The Magnificat invites us to dream with confidence and to hold fast to the God who is passionately concerned for the needs of those counted as least rather than for the 'greeds' of those counted as the greatest.

The same spirit of God that came upon Isaiah and overshadowed Mary is moving in our midst. The light is bright now, though we are still living in the darkness. We may pray fervently for wars to cease and captives to be liberated; we may pray anxiously for loved ones to survive another round of chemotherapy and another barrage of tests. But we know that on the other side of the door there is life and light and justice and peace. And so we rejoice. We join Mary in her song. For through the lens of the Magnificat, everything looks very different. Let us join our pregnant souls with Mary's to magnify the Lord as we stand and sing!