

God of the Poor

A sermon preached at the Vale Church, Broadstairs on 15th December 2019.

Loyalty to the real God

Reading: Luke 1:46b-55

Many of us are probably familiar with this passage from Luke's Gospel, generally known as 'the Magnificat'.

Luke tells us that Mary was speaking during a visit to her kinswoman Elizabeth. The Angel Gabriel had told Mary that she would conceive, and also that Elizabeth was 6 months pregnant (with a boy who turns out to be John the Baptist), so she went to visit her in Jerusalem. And after Elizabeth told Mary how blessed she was, this is what Luke has Mary reply.

In fact, it sounds like an early Christian hymn. Luke's words were written, of course, some 50 to 70 years after Jesus' crucifixion. After the early church had concluded that Jesus was both a prophet and the long-expected Messiah. Luke would have been well aware that Jesus' message stood in a long line of prophetic warnings, dating right back to, and even before, the time of the prophet Samuel. And this early hymn sounds very like another passage to be found in the books of Samuel: a passage where Hannah is praying, after bringing Samuel as a child to be raised by the prophet Eli. It includes the words:

*"Hannah prayed and said,
"My heart exults in the Lord;
my strength is exalted in my God.
My mouth derides my enemies,
because I rejoice in my victory.
2 "There is no Holy One like the Lord,
no one besides you;
there is no Rock like our God.
4 The bows of the mighty are broken,
but the feeble gird on strength.
5 Those who were full have hired themselves out for bread,
but those who were hungry are fat with spoil.
The barren has borne seven,
but she who has many children is forlorn.
7 The Lord makes poor and makes rich;
he brings low, he also exalts.
8 He raises up the poor from the dust;
he lifts the needy from the ash heap,
to make them sit with princes
and inherit a seat of honor."*

So, the passage in Luke reminds the early Jewish Christians that the faith shown by Mary was like that of Hannah, a trust that no matter how the world's domination systems oppress and mistreat people, she would be faithful to God, who has different values.

As you know, today is the third Sunday of Advent – a time when we both look back to the first Christmas and forward to the time when all will be put right with the world. And our reading reminds us of the central role played by both faith and compassion. When we speak of ‘faith’ in the sense the word it was used in New Testament times we mean “trust in God” or “loyalty towards God”, rather than belief that a particular set of assertions about God are true. And when we speak of ‘compassion’, we are talking about compassion for all those oppressed by the world’s domination systems. Perhaps even more than compassion, an assurance that God – the fountain of all that we call ‘real’ – empathizes with the downtrodden.

Of whom we still have too many in today’s world. On 5 December just a few days ago, for example, the Office for National Statistics published household wealth and data statistics for the UK for the two years July 2016 to June 2018. Shockingly, these showed that the 10% least wealthy households owe more than 3x as much as the total value of their wealth (property, pension and other). The 10% wealthiest, on the other hand, have 35x as much wealth as they have debt.

Figures from the Trussell Trust (The UK’s leading charity supporting Food Banks) show a 23% increase in food parcels distributed by Food Banks during March to September 2019 compared with the same period in 2018. Our own experience with the Food Bank in Folkestone suggests an even higher figure.

The ‘Kingdom of this world’ still deals in oppression and social injustice, even if it does so by other means than it did in Jesus’ day!! Mary and Hannah, on the other hand, placed their faith in the true God, not in the false Gods that sustain the world’s injustice.

False Gods that hold sway in our society today and are all too obviously on display during our Christmas celebrations. Gods such as:

- Anthropocentrism in all its forms: seeing everything as being about Human wellbeing and ignoring the health of the soil, climate, forests, water and oceans on which we depend
- Belief in unlimited progress and growth in spite of a finite world with finite resources;
- The idolatry of comfortable beliefs (in exploitation of animals and all nature’s resources, of the benevolence of ‘market forces’ etc. etc.) in the face of undeniable knowledge of the consequences;

All these beliefs in ‘false Gods’ have one thing in common – they all allow us to continue living as we are doing today – whereas in the Magnificat, Luke tells of Mary praising a God whose values are the very opposite of these. Values, in fact, that turn the world as we know it upside down.

Look in the Right Places

Reading: Matthew 11: 2–11

Our first reading concerned a meeting between two expectant mothers. Our second is set some 29 or so years later when their sons are grown up. John, Elizabeth’s son is now in prison, shortly before becoming Herod’s victim. Jesus, his younger kinsman, is at the height of his Galilean ministry.

The story of John's ministry would read much like the CV of a classic Old Testament prophet. John's was the classic prophetic message, "You are turning away from God – you are worshipping false Gods – 'Repent' (change the way you think – not say you're sorry) if you want to escape the wrath of God. If you had the Gospel reading from the Lectionary during last week's service (Matthew 3:1-12), you will have heard that in full.

But in today's reading John is in prison, from which he won't escape alive. His confidence is absent. He sounds as if he doubts his own proclamation that Jesus is the true Messiah. He sends messengers to provide him with some assurance.

Surely this is something that we can identify with. Doubt is as always a possibility when you put your faith in someone. Trust, faith, loyalty are not scientific facts. That is why doubt isn't the opposite of faith – betrayal is.

Most of us can empathize with John. Who hasn't asked themselves at some time, "Were we right to trust so and so?", "Were we daft to think that this would turn out to be a good job?", "Should we really have come this way in the first place?", "Were we crazy to hope that this illness would pass quickly?"

Can't we all point to such experiences in our own lives?

Jesus, too, seems to understand this. His answer implies no criticism of John, nor any demands for further loyalty. He simply says, 'Tell him what you see', "the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them."

Words that point in two different pieces of evidence: firstly, his own deeds and action in Galilee, which are public knowledge; and secondly, a reference straight back to the passage in Isaiah 61 (verses 1-3) that he read from in the Synagogue in Nazareth right at the start of his ministry.

But then he adds this, "Blessed is anyone who takes no offence at me." What on earth is that about? Why would John or anyone else 'Take Offence'?

The Greek word that is translated is "*scandalisthe*", from which we get our word 'scandal'. A 'scandal' is something we take offence at. And although Jesus' quote from Isaiah 61 and his actions both will have reinforced his credentials to John as the promised Messiah, he is not the kind of Messiah John was expecting. Indeed, he could easily be seen as a "scandalous" Messiah.

John made it clear that he expected the imminent wrath of God on all who didn't repent. His was the angry, violent God of the Old Testament. The God who, like Kings of old, used their military power to punish & oppress. The wrathful, vengeful God who, like all humans in power, ultimately got his way by force. The God imagined by the prophets – who fought the fire of human disobedience with the much more powerful fire of their irresistible force. And the Messiah was expected to be at the front of God's armies, leading the way to purge the world of evil by unimaginable force.

The kind of power in fact that you saw in Royal palaces. The kind of power wielded by people who dress in fine clothes. Kings like Herod, for example, who was about to behead John for embarrassing him about his marriage. The same Herod who had coins minted bearing pictures of reeds shaken by wind.



But as Jesus showed through his life and supremely through his resurrection, the power of the kingdom of heaven is to be found in powerlessness. In the wilderness, for example, where Jesus was tempted. In the wilderness into which the scapegoat was driven from the Temple every year on the Day of Atonement – a sacrifice for the sins of the People of Israel.

As Jesus said to his followers after the messengers left to go back to John, “Don’t look for the kingdom of God in palaces, look in the desert wastes.” Look among the starving, the oppressed, those at the margins of society. And do not take offense at a God who refuses to fight fire with fire. A God who as *Emmanuel* prefers to give his life in order to free humanity from unjust domination systems of their own making.

A God whose human likeness was born not in a palace, but in a stable.

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