

Malala, Mary & the Silence Breakers

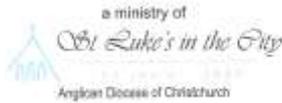
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2 Samuel 7:1-11

Romans 16:25-27

Luke 1:26-38, 46-55



Malala Yousafzai was unknown to the world when at the age of 12 she began writing a blog about life as a girl growing up in the Swat Valley of Pakistan and her longing for education for all children, especially girls. She became known to the world when as a 15 year old, she was shot in the head on her school bus by a gunman, yet survived and underwent rehabilitation in Birmingham. At just 17 she was the youngest recipient ever of the Nobel Peace Prize. She has just begun studies at Oxford University and continues her advocacy for the right to education for all, especially girl children.

I've been thinking about girls the age of Malala as we hear today the familiar story of the annunciation to Mary that she will be the mother of Jesus, God's Son. Mary was probably a young teenager about Malala's age, maybe as young as 13 or 14.

Just what was it really like for Mary, what were her feelings, emotions, reactions, to the news that she, a virgin, was expecting a child?

It's a reminder to us that midst the tinsel, Christmas is real. It's about a real pregnancy, a real mother and a real child. It's about real raw feelings of anxiety, fear, courage and hope, and it's ok for us to have a whole mixture of feelings at this time of year also.

It's often thought that Luke might have had access to Mary's story when writing his gospel, but I get the impression that the grim realities of Mary's pregnancy have been somewhat 'smoothed out' in the editing process, bringing us Luke chapters 1 and 2.

We get none of the anxiety of Matthew's version of the story where it's made clear that Mary is with child out of wedlock. Yes, she is engaged or betrothed to Joseph, which was a binding commitment, only dissoluble by divorce, but to be found to be pregnant while betrothed was certainly grounds for divorce, or even death by stoning.

Joseph bends over backwards in Matthew's account, to dismiss Mary quietly, rather than divorce her publicly which would expose her to public disgrace. But either way the reality would be that Mary would have been considered 'spoiled goods', and that her life story was set from that point,

a life of being considered outcast in her community, living in abject poverty.

All the more astounding, then, to hear Mary's response to the angel's stupendous but shocking news: 'Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.' (Luke 1:38).

Admittedly it is couched in the words that those called by God use in response throughout the Biblical record - here am I, here I am, Lord - it is a formula, a code phrase that those in the know will recognise. Ah, here is yet another person who is hearing God's call, and turning up for duty.

But the very formulaic nature of Mary's response makes me feel it is almost too good to be true, that it is the rote response of someone who is still shell-shocked, almost speechless, not quite struck dumb as was Zechariah at the news of the birth of John the Baptist, but still reeling at the enormity of the power of the angel's words, and of the names to be given to the child she will bear: Great, the Son of the Most High, holy, Son of God (Luke 1:32,35).

'Here am I, the *servant* of the Lord' - the word *doulos*, servant could be as usual in the New Testament more literally translated 'slave'. Mary's first response recognises that she has been selected by God for this job and that God's choosing leaves no room for her own volition, or lack of it.

We struggle in our day with such passivity, such acquiescence.

What would a teenager say to the angel today - what about my rights, my wants, needs and desires, don't you realise what you're asking of me? What about me? I doubt many of today's teenagers would be so quick with such a selfless response..

And yet, and yet there follows from Mary some sort of consent, some sort of 'yes' to God, which shows that even though she does not fully grasp or understand what is being asked of her, yet she is willing to say yes to God's word, God's promises - 'Let it be with me according to your word'. What did Mary know of God's word, God's promises, God's faithfulness? We do not know, it is interesting that in Luke's version here we learn nothing of Mary's background or character or virtues. We gain no sense that Mary is any more virtuous than all the other young women of her village or country or world of the time.

We do not get the impression that Mary earns or deserves the honour of being chosen to be the mother of Jesus. Yes, she is called by the angel '*favoured* one' (Lk 1:28) and told that she has '*found favour* with God'

(Lk 1:30) but in both cases, they are words derived from the Greek word '*charis*' meaning grace. God's choice of Mary is an act of unmerited grace. Mary is the recipient of God's grace, as are we all.

Perhaps that is why Luke's portrayal of Mary is still fairly 'cardboard' and one-dimensional. Yet we know as the familiar story proceeds that we will see Mary grow in understanding and faith. There will be for her a dawning reality of just what the angel's news means for her, both tremendous joy and tremendous suffering.

But all this over time. First of all there is the delightful little interlude of Mary's journey to visit her aged but pregnant relative, Elizabeth in the hill country of Judea, in Christian tradition identified with the small village of Ein Kerem near Jerusalem. I have visited this village with its churches, and the spring where one tradition has it that the annunciation happened as Mary drew water, the symbol of life. There is a lovely very moving statue of Mary and Elizabeth, face to face, delighting in each other's surprising news, standing tummies almost touching, almost bouncing off each other in their joy.



Behind on the walls of that churchyard, are the words of the Magnificat in a myriad of languages, a reminder that for Luke it is important that this good news is news for all the people, that as Simeon would prophesy, this child to be born would be a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and for glory to your people Israel. (Lk 2:32)

The words of the Magnificat are so familiar to us, that they can lose their force, and we also know full well that Mary's words are sourced predominantly from the song of Hannah in 1 Samuel 2, so again there is something formulaic about them. But yet there is nothing formulaic about the shock value of the great reversals that Mary prophesies: the Lord has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly (Lk 2:52). How we long that this may still happen in our world where power and violence seem so often to rule unchecked.

Yet I like to think Mary is there today in the face of such as Malala, symbolic of people without power who have been prepared to stand up for what they believe in, regardless of personal cost or danger. I'm mindful of the Time magazine person or rather people of the year this year, the women who are the Silence breakers



against abuse of women in Hollywood, among many other contexts, and also those survivors of sexual abuse in institutions in Australia, including the church.

This seems to be the way that God has always worked, through people who have little power, but who yet rely on the power and life-changing potential of a great God, who lifts up the lowly.

This was the God of King David, who is reminded in 2 Samuel 7 in his own annunciation through the prophet Nathan, that it is not through his own abilities that he has become king of Israel, rather God says, 'I took you from the pasture, from following the sheep, to be prince over my people Israel, and I have been with you wherever you went' (2 Sam 7:8).

This God is a God of surprises, of new beginnings, new things, a God for whom nothing is impossible, a God who pitches a tent among his people and leads them on into new and sometimes scary adventures.

But at the same time this God is a God of covenant faithfulness, of continuity of promise through history, a God who can be trusted to keep promises, to keep faith with people through thick and thin.

These two facets of God's nature: God's ever newness and God's ever faithfulness are what Mary will learn to trust in, as God tabernacles within her womb, pitches a tent within her, as Mary becomes the 'ark of the covenant' faithfulness of God, and brings the ever new child of God to birth.

As we prepare to journey with God into 2018, unknown to us and with many uncertainties in our world, may we go trusting in those same two blessings of God which Mary experienced:

- 1) God's ever newness, God's ability to bring new beginnings, new hopes, new joys, new opportunities and then
- 2) God's ever faithfulness, God's reliability and trustworthiness.

"I am confident of this, that the one who began a good work among you will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ." (Philippians 1:6).

Thanks be to God.