

⁴⁶ And Mary^{a1} said,

"My soul magnifies the Lord,

⁴⁷ and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,

⁴⁸ for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant.

Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed;

⁴⁹ for the Mighty One has done great things for me,

and holy is his name.

⁵⁰ His mercy is for those who fear him

from generation to generation.

⁵¹ He has shown strength with his arm;

he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.

⁵² He has brought down the powerful from their thrones,

and lifted up the lowly;

⁵³ he has filled the hungry with good things,

and sent the rich away empty.

⁵⁴ He has helped his servant Israel,

in remembrance of his mercy,

⁵⁵ according to the promise he made to our ancestors,

to Abraham and to his descendants forever."

The Mary of Luke's Gospel knows her stuff. She's clearly heard the stories of Israel and understands them to be her own. What God is up to, as unexpected as it is, is a continuation of the story of God's journey with Israel. Because Mary has confidence in who the Lord is, she knows that, even if a pregnancy wasn't exactly what she might have wished for, if God is doing it, it's for good.

Mary knows God's character, God's faithfulness to the promises made to Israel even when Israel failed to live up to its calling. This meant that Mary could say if this is the will of the Lord, so be it. May we all be so blessed with that kind of faith.

Knowing the story of God's faithfulness, Mary also knows that it's not all happiness and fun. Mary knows that from time-to-time God acts to bring judgement and justice. Sometimes the proud that need scattering are the people of Israel, sometime those that need pulling down from their thrones are Israel's kings. What the narratives and the prophetic texts of the Hebrew scriptures emphatically

portray is that human sinfulness is the cause of these disasters and God's acts are always a just response.

If God's justice is great, God's mercy is even greater. Sometimes the poor that need lifting up are Israel. No matter the failings on the human side of the covenant, God never forgets and never fails to keep God's side. God fills Israel with good things. When Israel enjoys peace and security, it's God's doing and it's God's free choice.

I think this is what David has not completely understood in our first reading this morning. I'm sure David's motivation for wanting to build God a house is from a good place. God has given him victory and David just wants to honour God. It seems like a good idea at first to the prophet Nathan too.

But that night, the word of God comes to Nathan. I always feel sorry for Nathan. I'm sure he doesn't enjoy having to come to the king telling him that he's got things wrong. I'm sure Nathan would rather just agree with King David and then go home and live a quiet life. But that's not the calling of a prophet.

Now, this is a little speculative, but I think the reason why it can't be David who builds the temple is because there's a risk that it could be seen as repaying God for the military conquest Israel has enjoyed. I think it has to be Solomon because the abundance with which God blesses him makes it very clear that even grandeur of the temple can only ever be a gesture of gratitude to God. Solomon is made rich beyond measure and only then does God give the instruction to build the temple.

I think this is vital because if God can be repaid, it starts to set up a transactional relationship between God and Israel. This is how the gods of the nations behave, demanding sacrifices to earn the bestowal of benefits. You'll be pleased to know that I don't intend to offer a comprehensive analysis of the Old Testament's sacrificial system this morning, but my own reading of those practices is that they primarily serve to remind the people of Israel of what God has done for them and to keep them orientated to the Lord.

God chose Israel before Israel was a nation. God promised Abraham and Sarah that they would be the parents of a great nation and God has shepherded the people through prosperity in the promised land and the desolation of exile. God's commitment is absolute.

This is what Mary knows and this is why there was so much expectation of God acting decisively to free Israel from the latest of its oppressors. The promise to David that his son would sit on his throne forever is one reason why so many looked for a new leader. A descendent of David is the natural candidate to be God's anointed one – messiah in Hebrew or Christos in Greek.

This is the context of the archangel Gabriel's message. God is faithful. God's people await the salvation of the Lord. Gabriel announces that God is at work again.

At first, what Gabriel has to say is a little surprising but I think it is, in fact, entirely consistent with what we know of the God of Abraham and Sarah. I grew up in Hamilton. At the beginning of John's gospel, when Nathaniel asks "can anything good come from Nazareth?" I feel personally attacked. But I think the messiah has to be born somewhere like Hamilton to an unwed mother and grow up in the house of diesel mechanic.

In my mind most of the conversations I've heard about the Christian doctrine of the virgin birth of Jesus completely miss the point. The point of the doctrine is not that Jesus' birth is a miracle or that his birth was somehow more pure than one arising from a normal conception. The main point is that Jesus' coming is God's initiative. The absence of a human biological father primarily serves, as I see it, to make it clear that salvation is from God. A secondary dimension, consistent with the rest of Luke's Gospel is that salvation arrives in places outside of societal expectations.

If the messiah is born in Herod's palace or if the messiah is the son of the high priest then I think we simply get another king of the sort the world knows. If victory is by military conquest like Jews had already achieved temporarily under Judas Maccabeus, we get another nation that trusts in the sword.

This is not the kind of salvation that God wants to bring to Israel. Israel has been brought low and lives under Roman occupation, but God wants more for the chosen people than simply to get rid of the Romans. Mary knows that God fills the hungry with good things. Most people might have wanted political and military sovereignty. God had better things in mind.

And I think here lies one of the lessons we need to keep learning from Advent and Christmas. God does far more abundantly than all we ask or think. God may well do what we don't expect. God may well do what we don't want, but God will do what we need.

It might well be that there are aspects of my life that fall under the category of the proud that need scattering. In fact, I'm sure of it. Some of my attitudes and priorities are sitting on thrones that are rightly that place of God in my life and need to be brought low.

Equally, there are parts of our lives that are poor and lowly that need raising up. Parts of our souls are hungry and need to be filled with good things. We might prefer to not face these parts of us, but I suspect that God's salvation will require it.

I'm sure that Mary didn't want to be an unwed mother in her society but, because she knew the character of her God, she could say yes. The salvation that God had prepared from the beginning of time for the whole world would cost her dearly, more than she could ever expect, but if it was really God's will, she was willing to risk her reputation and more.

What God has in store for us might not be what we would ask for, but because we hear of God's character in the same scriptures Mary heard and now even more because we know that God is revealed to us most fully in Christ Jesus, we too can trust God.

May God bless us with the faith of Mary to say yes.