

Advent 3  
13/12/2009

Mark the Evangelist

Micah 5:2 – 5a  
Magnificat  
Hebrews 10:5 - 10  
Luke 1:39 - 45

### **In from the margins – Mary and Elizabeth, God bearers to the world**

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*O Little town of Bethlehem, how still we see thee lie!* Micah was a prophet from the margins who preached in difficult times. Unlike his contemporary Isaiah, he was not of high birth, nor was he from Jerusalem. Micah was a commoner from a small town in the Judean foothills, a fierce champion of pure worship and a strong advocate of social justice. Micah witnessed a universal failure of leadership in the land and decay in all aspects of social and religious life. And Micah was aware of mounting political and military threats to Judah and Jerusalem. The first four chapters of Micah tell us this, but suddenly in Chapter 5, the prophet's words of judgment turn to words of hope and joy. Something yet to occur will break the spell and set the people free. There will be a birth in Bethlehem, David's town. Micah does not suggest this will be a son of David. What he does say is, a town of no consequence will move from the margins to the centre, because a new ruler will set things right for all the earth. The reference to the "ancient of days – from of old" means this transforming event has its lineage in the deep traditions of faith.

Mary's visit to Elizabeth, and Mary's song are so familiar we are liable to miss something exceptional. In their world - patriarchal, male dominated as it was – the experience of women was not normally highlighted. And there is another miracle, in the male dominated world of biblical scholarship and story-telling their story has not only been preserved, it survives to take centre stage. Two marginalized people from obscure places are given key roles in bringing God's creative change to the world. Without prior endorsement by men, and for no good reason that we are given, women are filled with the Holy Spirit, women offer prophetic utterances, women praise God for what God has done for them and all people. In a man's world, women who are open to God, become disciples: bearers of God to the world. Their willingness to receive and embody grace meant Mary and Elizabeth are as examples of the great reversal, resulting from the elusive presence of God's reign, active in the world.

Everything said here is profoundly underlined in Mary's song of praise her response to the blessing of God. In Mary's song God reverses human status and perception. The arrogant and mighty are pulled down and scattered and the poor are lifted up and filled with good things. All of life is here: poverty, hunger, conflict, the intimacy of the experience of God and praise of the majesty of God. This new song is also a song "from of old" – it is a profound rehearsal of the story of faith, from the time of Sarah and Abraham, which is to say the contemporary mission of God is deeply rooted in the long memory of faith.

The striking thing is how the pattern of God's reign connects with the women. The little people and the poor are the beneficiaries while the rich and powerful lose out, not because of punishment or revenge, but because the wisdom of God favours the poor. God is not subject to domination by the rules of the world: grace is not bound by market forces. God's work is done through lowly outsiders who are receptive to the Spirit, and accepting of the divine embrace. This is the reason the Scriptures call us to treat the poor with special respect, because we may find the mysterious presence of God among them more readily than among the proud and mighty. And if you think the centrality and freedom given to Mary and Elizabeth provides a basis for feminist theology you are right! From the time of Sarah and Abraham, women have been included in God's work of offering new life to the world, something solidly enacted in the ministry of Jesus.

The exchanges between Mary and Elizabeth are not narrative so much as proclamation that validates what the Angel Gabriel said to Mary about Jesus. The first thing that happened was John the Baptist leapt in Elizabeth's womb at the sound of Mary's greeting. The ancient understanding was that the way children were in the womb reflected their destiny, as in the case of Esau, the hairy man and Jacob the smooth, grasping man, who came out holding his brother's heel. John's leap is a sign of profound joy, eschatological joy. Even as a babe he is a prophet, who knows that "God is near".

Elizabeth's response to Mary's greeting is like a prophetic song of praise and is the basis for the Church's description of her. "*Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb.*" If Uniting Church people went around talking about "the blessed Virgin" people would think they were heading for Rome. But this is the Biblical title for Mary, gifted to us by the Holy Spirit through Elizabeth.

Elizabeth then says "*..why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord should visit me?*" If we read the Angel Gabriel's speech to Mary, he says: Hail Mary, the Lord is with you. We should not allow the maleness of the language to distract us from seeing the plain meaning. "*The Lord is with you*" equals God is with Mary. We take the miracle of this birth as being about sex, but it is not. It is a way of proclaiming the divine presence in Jesus within the full womanhood of Mary. Elizabeth's words, "the Lord is with you" have given the church reason to bestow on Mary the title *Theotokos*: God bearer. This does not mean her son will become a perfect patriarchal man. What it stands for is this: Mary's child is the embodiment of God, everything about this child will express God's self-disclosure to the world. This is the foundation of our faith, the connecting point that fully expresses the link between God the Creator and God the Spirit and God the human being.

Ironically these amazing prophetic statements of revelation are happening among marginal people from marginal places. People scoff at this. How can the revelation of God be so deeply hidden? But this is how it goes in the story of our faith. Even when this child is born, it is outsiders who come to worship him, while the rulers and religious leadership do not. And, ironically, he himself remained marginal, lived a life of service to the marginal, and died the death of a marginalized person.

During Advent our powerful readings lay out the contours of our faith, in order to prepare us to receive, from unexpected people and unexpected places, the revelation that God comes to us as one of us, and this changes everything about how we look on life.

We are also challenged to learn from these patterns and live by them. Gospel people are called to live Gospel lives. We struggle with this and, as some of the controversies about women and ordination and women in leadership reveal, the church still struggles with the idea that those on the margin can be welcomed in the centre. These are thorny issues for the church, and many looking on from outside wonder how the church's decisions fit with stories of women, who for no given reason or stated virtues, were invited by the Holy Spirit to be God bearers, vehicles of salvation to the world.

Outside the church it is interesting to reflect on one example, not religious, that enacts what we find in this story: the Grameen bank. Unlike other banks Grameen specializes in making small loans particularly to poor women. It finds that by targeting this group it changes the social pattern of things and empowers marginal people to improve their position and well-being in society. And this happens without creating upheaval for the rich. Grameen enables women to come in from the margins, and to be the bearers of new life for themselves and others.

As far as the church is concerned, it has to learn to see that the stories we hear today are not about sex or pregnancy. They are about how the sovereignty of God, active in the world, enables people who are open to God to embody God in the world. The challenge is for us to consider what the Holy Spirit is calling us to do, individually and as a congregation, as we seek to stand with Mary and Elizabeth as God bearers to the world.

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