

John 1:6-8, 23, 26b-28

Psalm 126

Luke 1:39-55

Tomorrow's promised today

In the season of Advent, our Scripture readings do strange things with time. We are called to *remember* something which is *yet* to occur while, at the same time, called to prepare for the arrival of one who, common sense would say, has been and gone. The same kind of time-twisting is heard today in Mary's song of praise:

⁵¹ [God] has shown strength with his arm;
he has scattered the proud...⁵² He has brought down the powerful ...
[he has] lifted up the lowly;
⁵³ he has filled the hungry with good things,
and sent the rich away empty.

Whatever we might think about where *we* are in the midst of these powerful and lowly, hungry and rich, the claim is unambiguous: God *has* worked with power to change the order of things in the world. Yet, this doesn't ring true. From time to time, we might see the lowly lifted up and the haughty brought down but, for the most part, things don't seem to be going the way Mary's song would imply on a plain reading; the assertion that God "has" done such things is not convincing.

But the issue is not only that we don't see this kind of change in the time between Mary's song and now. The thing about her song is that nothing could have happened yet – *at the very time she sings* – if she is singing the *gospel* – singing what God has done in Jesus. Jesus is not yet born, but she *still* sings,

[God] has shown strength ...; he has scattered ... He has brought down... [he has] lifted up... he has filled... and sent away...

It is odd that Mary should speak in this way.

The key to understanding this strange speech is to see that there is no "history" here, in the ordinary sense. So far as Christian confession is concerned, there is little interest in the order or timing of revelation but only in what is revealed. And what is revealed about God's work for the poor and the hungry? The only sense in which faith can say unequivocally that God *has* shown strength to lift up and fill the weak and poor is in relation to the resurrection of the crucified Jesus. *He* is the powerless and lowly one filled and lifted by God.

But consider what this now means! Mary does not sing the praises of the God who has lifted *her* up, as some readings of this text run. Or, at least, this is a secondary sense of her song. Rather, Mary praises the God who raised her son, the crucified Jesus of Nazareth. And here we see the Bible's strange sense of God in time: Mary praises God for *having* done something that has not yet happened at this moment in the story.

This is bad history by most standards, but is in fact good biblical theology. Not unreasonably, we typically read history from start to finish, as if it were simply the unfolding of events from beginning to end. The very way in which we read a book – including the Bible! – reinforces this. Yet the Scriptures read, or tell, from end to beginning. The "end" is some experience of God, a salvation of some sort: an exodus, a

healing, a restoration or a resurrection. This new thing is of such proportion that the beginning cannot be merely the first thing which happened on the way toward the present experience. The beginning is what *must have been the case* for us to have experienced the salvation we have.

And so, when it comes to what Mary sings, the important thing is not that she *did* say this – for it would make very little sense if she did. Instead, for *Luke* himself, bursting to speak of the work of God in Jesus, there would have been nothing else Mary *could* have said: the prelude must anticipate the climactic finale. If, in view of the resurrection, we imagine that Mary might have sung a song of praise to God at the news of her pregnancy, it would *have* to have been a *prophetic* song, because of what was going to come of her child. The song would point to the end which is Luke's real purpose in telling the story: God's work in Jesus. Why does Mary sing? Because of what God has done. And what has God done? God has raised the crucified Jesus from death. All of this then, and *most* strangely, makes the singing Mary the New Testament's first believer in the resurrection.

Once again, we acknowledge that this makes no sense: it hasn't happened yet, when Mary sings. But all belief in the power of God is like this: all confidence in the power of God is the bringing into the present some promised but unrealised future as if it had already happened. All belief is a living out of what God *has* done before it has been done, a living *towards* what we expect God to do.

Faith is a lived-out vision of the future. Faith says, *That* is how things will be in the end, so *this* is how I will *be* now: live with others now, speak of God now. The real question in faith, then, is simply the vision: how will all of this end? What will we say God has done in our story when it comes to being able to tell it in as finally completed?

To see what is at stake in this way is to see also that faith is not merely a "religious" question. Any life – whether it knows God, is still seeking God or is altogether indifferent to God – is the backward projection of some expected future, some time of completion, some sense of what it is all about. Every conscious action (and most of our unconscious ones) speaks of our sense of where we are headed, of what will finally be declared about the proper order of things. When Mary sings that God *has* done this, she declares her place in the world and the world's place in God, despite every contradictory appearance. My soul magnifies the Lord, Mary sings, because God "has" magnified Jesus and *will* magnify me.

And, to the extent that she not only says this but lives it, she begins to appear, a glimmer of God's intention for her. And God begins also to become clearer, a glimmer of Mary's own future.

This is Advent faith: no mere wish that things were different, but a life lived differently because we have caught a fleeting glimpse of the possibility of a new order in which is set right all we know is wrong within us.

Let us live, then, as if what will finally matter has *already* happened and we are its reflection: an image of the God who is justice, mercy and peace.
