

Mary's Song - Magnificat



Read Luke 1:46-55

'My soul glorifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour' (verses 46b -47)



A Prayer

Gracious God, we thank you for the faithful witness of your saints throughout the ages, both those known to us by name, and others who have been faithful and obedient to your call on their lives and yet are known only to you. As we gather together to look at this wonderful song of Mary, we pray that you will help us not only to better understand the words, but also the singer. We ask this through your dear Son, our Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.



Tuning up

What change in your personal circumstances, or indeed in the wider world at this moment in time would in your estimation be worthy of a great celebration?

Do you have a favourite song, old or new, that you listen to or sing to yourself when you are feeling in a really positive mood?



The Accompaniment

Luke is our historian, and he is also a doctor and a man of intellect, as his excellent use of Greek indicates. He knows that there are many accounts circulating about the events in Jesus' life, and has set himself the task of fully investigating the evidence so that he can give a thorough account to 'most excellent Theophilus'.

We don't know who Theophilus was, but one intriguing suggestion is that this was an honorary title and not an actual person. The word in Greek also means 'Friend of God' which would mean that both Luke and Acts were addressed to anyone who fits that description, and therefore we could include ourselves. Luke writes this so that we 'might know the certainty of the things you have been taught' (Luke 1:4)

Mary's song is her natural reaction to a meeting between herself and her cousin Elizabeth, who tells Mary that the child in her own womb has leapt for joy when he heard her speak. Elizabeth has also realised that the blessing that she has received is closely connected with that of Mary. They are both to be greatly used by God, and Elizabeth's reply conforms to this insight.

'Why am I so favoured, that the mother of my Lord should come to me?'



The Verses

This well-known song, called the Magnificat because of its first line in Latin, 'Magnificat anima mea Dominum' is full of Old Testament imagery – close in form to 1 Samuel 2:1-10, the prayer of Hannah as she gives her son, Samuel, into God's service as an offering for answered prayer.

It talks of salvation, as did Zechariah's song, and reflects the shared dream of Israel that one day all that the prophets had said would come to pass, God would do what he had promised and every nation on earth would be blessed through the descendants of Abraham (Gen 12:1-3).

But for that to happen, powers that kept people in slavery would have to tumble, God would have to battle the forces of evil, the rich and the power-brokers who controlled the people through brutality and fear. This was the world that Mary and Elizabeth knew only too well, living as they did under Herod the Great, with the backing of Rome.

On a human level we have Elizabeth, pregnant after so many decades of yearning for a child, and Mary, expecting so much sooner than would be expected. In their meeting, there is no tension but only joy and an outpouring of God's Spirit seen in Elizabeth's praise and Mary's song.

On a spiritual level, Mary's song infers that God's salvation has come even before the birth of Jesus. But then we are familiar with

Jesus overturning more than a few tables in the Temple, so perhaps in her words we can see that God's choice has passed over those who might be expected to deliver salvation – kings and rulers, the mighty and the rich, and instead embraced the humble and obedient, entrusting her with the role of mother to God's Son.

Mary's insight is that she realises the significance of what is happening in a world of which she is now the focus, and rejoices that God has set his salvation into motion, and it will come to pass, as promised to her ancestors.



The Magnificat is a song of revolution on three levels:

- 1) It targets pride – that's a moral revolution. William Barclay says that Christ enables a person to see themselves as they really are, and that is the deathblow to pride.
- 2) It targets the mighty and exalts the humble – a social revolution, because it breaks through the human divisions of status and prestige and considers all people to be of equal value.
- 3) It targets the hungry rather than the rich – it's an economic revolution. Rather than a society which encourages greed, a Christian society is one which considers the needs of all, which shares so that all might benefit.



The chorus

1 - There are similarities between Mary's beautiful song and that of Hannah in 1 Samuel 2. Does this give us an insight into Mary and her upbringing?

2 – Traditionally, Luke’s Gospel has been assumed to have been written following a request by someone called Theophilus. If in fact it was written to help anyone who considers themselves a ‘most excellent friend of God’ does that alter our picture of Luke?

3 - Mary was probably in a difficult position with being pregnant and as yet unmarried. We don’t know what the reaction of her parents was, but we do know that she spent quite some time with her relative Elizabeth. How vital to Mary might this relationship be?

4 - This is a song that is regularly sung as part of worship in some denominations. Is it one that we can relate to ourselves, as well as remembering it as the words of Mary?

5 - Mary acknowledges that future generation will talk of how blessed her life has been. Bearing in mind denominational differences, how should the worldwide Church best remember Mary as part of God’s big picture of Salvation?

6 – The Jewish people had in their minds an image of the kind of Messiah that they were looking for, and how he would achieve his aim. How guilty are we of sometimes trying to tell God what to do, or conform to our image, rather than see his actions as Mary does?

7 - In verse 52 do you think Mary thinking militarily, or is this more to do with status?

8 – Similarly, in verse 53 in what way has Jesus fed the hungry and sent the rich away empty (can you relate this to any of Jesus’ encounters in the Gospels)?

9 - William Barclay in his commentary suggests there’s more than a hint of revolution in Mary’s song. Is it right to think of Christianity in this way, and if so how should that be reflected in our lives?

10 – The Gospel writers each have their own way of handling the birth of Jesus. Luke’s account is very people-centred, and he spends some time giving his readers an insight into the lives of Zechariah, Elizabeth and Mary. Mark, by comparison goes straight in with John the Baptist in the desert and the baptism of Jesus. Does Luke’s approach help you?



Outro

Have you considered your own calling? Have you heard God’s prompting, through prayer or reading of Scripture to undertake something new? What was your response?