

Sunday 16th August 2020 Feast of the Blessed Virgin Mary

Today we celebrate a woman because of her humanity, whose eyes may have been on heaven but whose feet were very firmly in this world. Mary is often regarded as an emblem of the church, encouraging the church (and therefore each one of us) to have our eyes fixed on heaven but our feet firmly in this world.

There are many people who find an issue with the Church's remembrance of Mary in our Feast day calendar. One of our former curates felt uncomfortable saying the Hail Mary and others may well feel the same. But it is important to remember that when we say the Hail Mary, we are not praying *too* Mary, we are asking her to pray *for* us. Mary is always always seen as presenting Jesus to us and is known in the Orthodox Church as the First Disciple....we too are called to present Jesus to the world as his disciples.

I am always astonished at the idea that Mary may have been a meek and mild woman/girl. She simply couldn't have been. If you think about it, the Magnificat is actually a protest song....her announcement about the subversive nature of Jesus kingdom and ministry to come. It is inspired by God and comes out of the mouth of a pregnant unwed teenage mother to be, uncertain about her own future on the edge of the powerful Roman Empire.

The German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer recognized the subversive nature of Mary's song. Before being executed by the Nazis, he spoke these words in a sermon during Advent on December 17, 1933:

"The song of Maryis at once the most passionate, the wildest, one might even say the most revolutionary hymn ever sung. This is not the gentle, tender, dreamy Mary whom we sometimes see in paintings...."

In it Mary declares:

"He has performed mighty deeds with his arm; he has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts. He has brought down the mighty from their thrones and raised up the lowly. He has filled the hungry with good things and sent the rich away empty".

For those on the margins, for those who struggle, for those who have been exploited, for the abused and abandoned, for asylum seekers facing an uncertain future at the hands of an inhospitable government, this is good news. With so much injustice happening in our world at this time, these words should inspire us to work towards raising up the lowly. This is the call of the Magnificat.... This is the great reversal. Yet for those in power, those who exploit others, there is a different story.

These words are so provocative, that over the past century at least 3 countries have banned the public recitation of them. These governments have considered the song's message to be too dangerous to the powerful of the day. They include:

- During the British rule in India, the singing of the Magnificat in church was prohibited because of its inflammatory words. So, on the final day of British rule

in India, Gandhi, who was not a Christian, requested that this song be read in all places where the British flag was being lowered.

- During the 1980s, the government of Guatemala found the ideas raised by Mary's proclamation of God's special concern for the poor to be so dangerous and revolutionary that the government banned any public recitation of Mary's words.
- The dictatorship in Argentina banned Mary's song after the Mothers of the Disappeared displayed its words on placards in the capital plaza.

It is good news to those on the outer edges of society, and bad news to those in power and privilege. It calls us to live a different way, to change allegiances and to be a part of God's Kingdom.

The invitation today is, like Mary and later on through Jesus, to see this unexpected beauty in the lives of those on the margins, for it is there that we truly experience the hope of the God who came down to earth, put on skin and lived as one of us. We are again reminded that Jesus came to comfort the disturbed and to disturb the comfortable.

The sign of a civilised and humane society is not how it performs in times of plenty but how it behaves in times of want and need. It is not good enough for a humane society - and quite impossible for the Church - to pull up the drawbridge with a sense of comfortable security, that we'll get by until the storm has passed. This was part of what caused me personally real distress at the beginning of this pandemic - that we were told to close our churches. We are called, as a church, to stand alongside those who are suffering and scared and traumatised....we are not called to close our doors and wait it out. "We are all made in the image of God", "we are members one of another", are mantras which have no currency unless we the church are prepared to put our money, our effort, our resources, our energy, and our political clout where our mouth is.

Today we celebrate a woman because of her humanity, whose eyes may have been on heaven but whose feet were very firmly in this world. She may indeed have mounted the scrapheap and been crowned Queen of Heaven, but she is of no earthly or heavenly use to us unless we realise that her robe is red, the sword has pierced her heart and her prayer is for those who, like her, experience the scrapheap of humanity. Her prayer is our challenge and our inspiration. Amen.