

Magnificat

Luke 1.46-55

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Mary, the mother of Jesus, burst out in a magnificent prayer of praise to God when her aunt Elisabeth had spoken prophetic words about Mary and her Son.

Elisabeth exclaimed loudly, 'Blessed are you among women and blessed is the fruit of your womb.'

And Mary then burst out in this prayer that we call the Magnificat.

Mary prayed in the Aramaic language; Luke translated this into Greek, and then the Christians in Rome made their own Latin Bible translation that says: 'Magnificat anima mea Dominum.' My soul magnifies the Lord.

That is why we call this prayer the Magnificat.

1. Strong words

The words of Mary are amazing. This young woman, a teenager, prayed a string of bible verses. She knew her Old Testament and every line in her prayer comes straight from her Bible.

That is a great example of prayer for us. By using the word of God and speaking those words back to God, Mary shrouds herself in the reality that is expressed in these words.

Mary makes the meaning of the Word of God a reality for herself, there and then, by speaking those words in the presence of God.

To read a Psalm, for instance Psalm 23 about God being our shepherd, is great and is encouraging. But by praying Psalm 23, and by entering in the presence of the Great Shepherd, we enter into the reality of the words.

Mary prayed amazing words. 'He has brought down the mighty from their thrones and exalted those of humble estate. He has filled the hungry with good things, and the rich he has sent away empty.'

We read these words in church with Christmas, and that may create a rather romantic context for understanding this prayer, of snow and jingle bells.



If you pray the daily evening prayers of our church, you will pray this prayer of Mary every day. And then the words of Mary do not sound very romantic and Christmassy anymore. They sound revolutionary.

I posted these words of Mary on Facebook recently, and an old, very wealthy Armenian facebook friend of mine — he lives in Cairo - wrote to me: ‘These words cannot be from Mary, this is communism!’

In Latin America some liberation movements have understood and used these words of Mary as a sort of revolutionary manifesto. Therefore in some countries the usage of this prayer of Mary has at times been forbidden.

According to the Washington Post, India, Guatemala and Argentina have at times outright banned the Magnificat from being recited in liturgy or in public. I have not been able to verify this, but it is definitely easy for rebel movements to use these words of Mary for their own ends.

And no-one less than Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the German pastor and theologian who was executed by the Nazis, he called the Magnificat “the most passionate, the wildest, one might even say the most revolutionary hymn ever sung.”

So my wealthy friend in Cairo could not imagine Mary to have used these words. The elderly gentleman is not particularly well versed in the Bible, so I told him where to find it, in Luke.

His next comment: ‘How can Luke know this. He must have made it up!’

I was not in the mood for theological discussions, so I left it at that. But the question is relevant. Did Mary really pray this?

2. She prayed these words

Luke wrote his Gospel probably around 80 years after the event. That sort of date is what most scholars agree about, give or take a few years. That is quite a long time later of course - but hold on.

Luke travelled with the apostle Paul on some of his journeys. We know this from the book of the Acts of the Apostles. And during his years of travel with Paul and in his meetings with Christians here and there, of course he picked up many stories about Jesus.

And then one day, Luke sat down to write his Gospel. He was a medical doctor, we know this from the letter of Paul to the Colossians. So an educated man. So he also produced his Gospel in an educated manner. He opens it by presenting his methodology to us. Listen to what Luke says:



Many have undertaken to draw up an account of the things that have been fulfilled among us, just as they were handed down to us by those who from the first were eyewitnesses and servants of the word. With this in mind, since I myself have carefully investigated everything from the beginning, I too decided to write an orderly account. (Luke 1.1-3)

Luke speaks of eyewitness accounts, and of careful research. So he used credible sources, and there were many written sources of eyewitness available.

The Anglican Cambridge scholar from Ridley Hall, Richard Bauckham, wrote some phenomenal books. In this he shows how Luke often mentions the names of individuals throughout his gospel, and he does so because these are people who participated in or were eyewitness to the events that Luke describes. People who could verify that stories were not made up.

The first two chapters of Luke's Gospel are about our Christmas stories. They form a very specific entity in the Gospel, with four separate prayers, or songs, that tie the chapters together.

Mary herself was an eyewitness, and probably one of the best. She saw the early life of Jesus in front of her eyes.

Think of this: Why would Luke say in the end of these stories about the early life of Jesus, that 'Mary treasured up all these things in her heart'?

I think Luke means to say, Mary remembered, she remembered all. Luke is saying: this is where I have my information from. From Mary herself. Maybe he used an existent document with sayings from Mary.

Or maybe he spoke personally with Mary about these events. Is that possible?

Let me ask you, who was asked to take care of Mary, when Jesus died on the cross?

Yes, John.

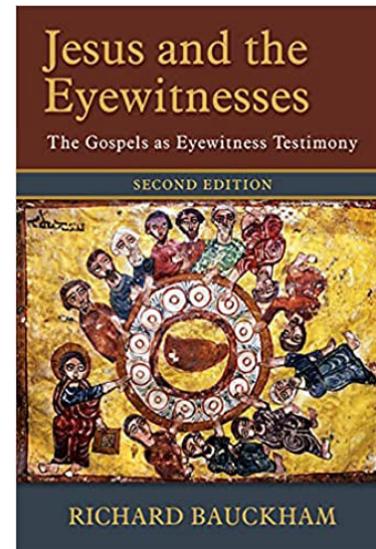
And from the writings of the early church we know that the Apostle John became a bishop in Ephesus. From the writings of the early church, we also see that Mary stayed with John.... Yes. In Ephesus.

And in Ephesus, in that same city, Luke has been buried. So he also lived there. At the same time as Mary maybe?

So I find it totally credibly that we really, in the words in the Gospel of Luke, hear the actual things that Mary prayed.

So I am sorry, good Armenian friend in Cairo, but I think you are wrong. Luke gives us an accurate account of what Mary prayed.

But how to understand what went on in this prayer? If this was not revolutionary communism, then what?



3. If not communism, then what?

First, Mary praises God because He looked ‘on the humble estate of his servant.’ Mary speaks here of herself. She praises God for the honor that she carries the Messiah, the Christ of God.

God chose her to undo damage done by Eve in paradise: she brought the solution of our sins into the world.

‘He who is mighty has done great things for me, says Mary, and she realised how precious this was: ‘From now on all generations will call me blessed.’

But after this personal beginning, she ends the prayer by speaking of God who helped his servant Israel and that He remembered his covenant made with Abraham and his offspring.

Mary realises that what happens to her, is the fulfilment of God’s covenant promises and in her prayer she identifies with Israel. In verse 48 it seems she speaks of herself as God’s humble servant, but then in verse 54 she speaks of Israel as God servant.

That is also part of prayer. To not pray for your own situation only, but to identify with the people of God and their needs. We do not pray ‘give me today my daily bread,’ but ‘give us today our daily bread.’

Mary received the Messiah for Israel, and for us. For all the people of God. She played a crucial role in God’s covenantal dealings with Israel. And in that context we have to look at her words about God bringing ‘down the mighty from their thrones’ and ‘exalting those of humble estate.’ About God ‘filling the hungry with good things, and the rich He has sent away empty.’

Mary began her prayer by looking at herself as the humble servant of God, and now she is jubilant that God lifts up the humble. She thinks of herself, and maybe of all the humble servants of God in Israel. Jesus came to lift up the poor, the humble, the needy.

But the reverse is also true: Jesus came to throw the mighty from their thrones and to send the rich away empty.

Mary quotes the covenantal language of God from her Bible: This is the language from the prophets of Israel who complained that among the people of God, there were brutal rulers and wicked rich landowners who oppressed the poor.

The prophets promised a total reversal on the Day of the Lord. God promises change. He will renew his own people in the first place.

And Mary knew: this time has now begun. God sends his Messiah to change all things. And Mary is so sure of this that prayerfully she spoke about this change as if it had already happened.

She is barely pregnant, but she knew: God has now done it. He has started his program of blessing the poor and putting down those who abuse the poor. God has come to intervene.

By choosing this humble girl to bring the Son of God into the world, God had already scattered the proud, he had brought down the mighty from their thrones, he had exalted the humble.

The ax is at the root of the tree. God chose a poor young girl. He chose someone who was not from a powerful family in Jerusalem. He made all those rich and famous people in the capital city look foolish. He made all those male chauvinist gentlemen look irrelevant. God came to save his people and He did not need a man for this

So yes, Mary's prayer is revolutionary. It is about amazing change. But it must be understood in the context of the salvation history of the whole bible.

God continues with his plans for his people and for his world. And He uses small people like Mary. People like you and me.

Mary shows us that there is hope for the small, the poor, the people pushed down.

And the people who oppress, the tightfisted, the rich who can't share, they stand condemned already. God's preference is for the humble and the poor.



“Blessed are the poor in spirit,
for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”
-Matthew 5:3

Conclusion

So what to do with this? First let us fulfil Mary's prophecy, and join all generation who call her and the fruit of her womb blessed.

And let us praise God that He acted in history, that He did begin the process of bringing forgiveness and justice to our world.

And let us choose to be on the right side - the side of Mary and Jesus. The side of the humble, the poor, the hungry. The side of the servants of God.

That is a choice and an attitude. To side with the people who are victims of other people and economic systems that only make some people filthy rich and keep others under the thumb.

But we do that not as secular revolutionaries but as servants of Jesus Christ, as people who depend on God's mercy and who show mercy to people in need.

With Mary we praise God for his mercy, for his salvation, for his choice us, ordinary humans.

Amen.