

HIW 16.05.2010

St. Luke 1, 46-55

And Mary said: My soul glorifies the Lord / and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour, / for he has been mindful of the humble state of his servant. / From now on all generations will call me blessed, / for the Mighty One has done great things for me - / holy is his name. / His mercy extends to those that fear him, / from generation to generation. / He has performed mighty deeds with his arm; / he has scattered those who are proud in their innermost thoughts, / He has brought down rulers from their thrones / but has lifted up the humble. / He has filled the hungry with good things / but has sent the rich away empty. / He has helped his servant Israel, / remembering to be merciful / to Abraham and his descendents for ever, even as he said to our fathers.

Magnificat! This great song of praise and joy bursts out of Mary, pregnant with Jesus, as she arrives at the home of her cousin Elizabeth, pregnant with John the Baptist, and is greeted by Elizabeth with the timeless words: "Blessed are you among women!".

As you can see from our yellow scarves, my wife and I have spent the last three days at the Ecumenical Kirchentag in Munich. As I had undertaken to preach to you this morning, we had to come home yesterday and so miss the concluding service this morning. You may have been watching it on television before coming here; if so, you will know that the Magnificat is the theme of the service, and so it seemed appropriate to take it as the text for my sermon too, though I would not be so presumptuous as to suppose that what I have to say on the subject can match up to what EKD President Schneider and Archbishop Zollitsch have to say in Munich.

Maybe this will help to make the Magnificat better known in Germany than it seems to have been up to now, even among churchgoers – or at least, that is my impression. It is more familiar to those who sing in choirs, which most of the people I associate with privately and in my spare time do; but even they tend to know it mainly from having sung the setting by Bach, or the Monteverdi Vespers, which is to say they know it in Latin, and know of it as a concept, but are not necessarily very familiar with its content – except of course for the few among them whose Latin is above average.

This is very different among British people, or at least among Anglicans. For those brought up in the Church of England, the Magnificat is at the heart of

the ancient service of Evensong, or Evening Prayer. Together with the Nunc Dimittis, the Song of Simeon, "Lord, now let your servant depart in peace...", it has been chanted Sunday by Sunday for centuries in every parish church and every cathedral throughout the country. As a result, every English composer – yes, there are quite a lot of English composers, and some of them are very good – has furnished the Church with a setting, or in some cases many settings, of "Mag and Nunc", as the two Canticles, the Magnificat and the Nunc Dimittis, have been known to generations of choirboys.

My generation, of course, grew up with the old translation made by Archbishop Thomas Cranmer for the Book of Common Prayer of 1549. Even as a child, I don't think I had any difficulty understanding what it was all about in general terms; but I have to admit that the opening words, "My soul doth magnify the Lord", were a bit puzzling. The modern translation you have in front of you starts "My soul glorifies the Lord". The modern prayer book says "My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord". But "magnify the Lord"? In modern English we simply do not use the word "magnify" in that way any more. The modern child can only associate it with the magnifying glass; and all the more so if he (or she) happens to collect stamps and read detective stories. Somehow, I could never sing the Magnificat without the image of Sherlock Holmes coming into my mind, wearing his tweed jacket and his famous deerstalker hat, down on his hands and knees, his magnifying glass in his hand, and peering at the ground through it. Looking for some trace of God, perhaps?

Now even as a child, I knew that this was nonsense; but the idea of looking for God is one that is worth considering more closely nevertheless. Do you remember – if you are old enough – how the Soviet cosmonaut Yuri Gagarin, the first person to orbit the Earth, declared to the world that he had searched the heavens but had found no sign of God? Of course he found no sign of God, because I am sure he was not searching to find God at all; rather, he was pretending to search, with the intention of not finding God. The Psalmist who cried out in the psalm we have read today [Ps. 139, 8]: "If I go up to the heavens, you are

there; if I make my bed in the depths, you are there," never had the opportunity to encircle the Earth in a spaceship or to dive to the bottom of the ocean in a submarine; but I am quite sure that if he had, he would indeed have found God in those places. But at the same time, he did not need to go up to the heavens or down into the depths to find God, because clearly, the person who wrote that Psalm was already deeply aware of knowing God, and even more of being known by him: "O Lord, you have searched me out and known me; you are familiar with all my ways" [Ps. 139, 1-2]. Although there may be exceptions, I am sure that in most cases, people who search for God and find him in fact knew him before; it is God himself who puts the desire to seek him in our hearts. "You will seek me and find me; when you seek me with all your heart, I will be found by you," God says through the prophet Jeremiah [Jer. 29, 13-14]. The search for God is then not like the search for gold or oil. Rather, it is like the search for a lost friend or relative, someone we have known. When we find them, the search ends in recognition: we know when the search is at an end, because what we have found is what we knew was there to be found.

When Abram left his country and his people, as we heard in today's watchword [Gen. 12, 4] at the beginning of the service, he was also setting out in search of God. Yet he was doing "as the Lord had told him": it was God himself who sent him out. God was at the beginning of his journey and at the end. But of course, at the end of his journey, Abraham, as he had become, knew God better than he had done when he heard God calling him to set out; and as a result of his search, he himself was deeply changed.

Which brings me back – at last, you may say – to Mary and the Magnificat. My Proposition No. 1 to the Magnificat: God can change people. God changed Mary, and God can change us.

As far as Mary is concerned: one of the things I miss from the Bible, one of the things I wish were in it but aren't, is more about our Lord's childhood and family background. Could it be that the Evangelists did not take children as seriously as Jesus himself did? The only story we have about his childhood is

one in which he is seen acting like an adult, sitting among the teachers in the temple, which St. Luke clearly thought was a good thing. It's not surprising that there are folk stories and folk carols originating from various countries that try to fill this gap by narrating miracles that Jesus is imagined to have performed in his childhood. But it's not more miracles I want, nor is it more angels or wise men from the east, but quite simply: what was everyday life like in the Holy Family? What kind of person was Mary? Why was she chosen to receive the salutation of the angel and become the vehicle for God's work of salvation?

We really do not know. But what the Magnificat makes very clear is that she felt utterly changed by what had happened and what was happening to her, lifted up out of obscurity: "for he has been mindful of the humble state of his servant", or as the old translation puts it, "the lowliness of his handmaiden." "From now on, all generations will call me blessed": her name will be known as long as the world continues. I am quite sure that God was no stranger to Mary before the angel came to her; but because her mind and her heart were open to God she was able to receive and accept what he brought to her, and so came to know God in a way she had never done before. Out of the knowledge of God came a search for a greater knowledge of God; and out of that search a knowledge far deeper than she had known before. Now suppose Yuri Gagarin had been eavesdropping, listening at the window of Mary's house: I wonder if he would have seen or heard the angel? I don't expect he would; but that takes nothing away from the transformation that came about in Mary's life.

Much of the story of Jesus' ministry is the story of people having their lives changed by God. Some of them became apostles, and their names too will be known to all generations, "even unto the end of the world" [Matt. 28, 20]. Others, as obscure as Mary before the Annunciation, remained obscure; what became of them is not recorded, either in the Gospels or the history books; but I feel certain that the change Jesus brought about in them lasted for the rest of their lives.

When I started thinking about this topic, a German hymn came to mind that I expect most of you know: "Wir haben Gottes Spuren festgestellt". The

first line takes me back to my childhood again, bringing back once more that picture of Sherlock Holmes with his magnifying glass, looking for traces of God. I have not been able to find an English version of this hymn, so we can't sing it this morning. But in any case, it is a hymn I don't feel too comfortable with. One reason is that for its examples of traces of God it draws entirely upon Biblical accounts; indeed, the refrain states it quite explicitly, "Zeichen und Wunder sahen wir geschehn / in längst vergangnen Tagen" – "We saw signs and wonders happen in days long ago". Of course we draw on the Bible for stories and events that tell us in exemplary fashion about the relationship between God and humankind; but these are only of real relevance if we can relate them to what we see around us today. However, when I started to try and think of people in modern times whose lives were changed by God, I found it more difficult than I had imagined. This is because that change, that awareness of having been changed, is something so personal that other people may seldom be aware of it.

I'd like to tell you of one outstanding non-Biblical example, although even this one is about 350 years old. It concerns the French religious philosopher Blaise Pascal. No-one ever doubted during Pascal's lifetime that he was a believer, but it was only after his death that the world learnt how the God he had always known had entered his life and changed it with a greater knowledge. By enormous good luck, a servant who was sorting out his belongings after his death found a document sewn into the lining of his jacket which recorded an intense religious experience. It began with the words: "Fire. God of Abraham, God of Isaac, God of Jacob, and not of the philosophers and scholars." The document was dated seven and a half years before Pascal's death. The servant knew that the jacket was not as old as that; Pascal must have transferred the precious document from one garment to the next each time he had a new one.

I have no doubt that there are many people around us, perhaps close to us, who have undergone and are undergoing such life-changing experiences today. It is not always obvious to those outside: Yuri Gagarin would not see it at all.

But it is so. If Pascal had been able to eavesdrop on Mary, he would certainly have seen the angel.

My Magnificat Proposition No. 2: God can change the world. Indeed, God does change the world. "He has brought down rulers from their thrones, but has lifted up the humble" – Mary does not prophesy it for the future, she states it as having happened already. That the world changes, everyone knows and can observe. That rulers are brought down from their thrones, just as much. There can be no better example in modern history than the collapse of Communism in 1989-90; those who were not too young will remember the euphoria of those few months when one dictatorial regime after another fell, like dominoes, all across central and eastern Europe, in most cases not brought down by military force, but by the uprising of the humble and meek, who took to the streets demanding justice and freedom. The collapse of apartheid in South Africa is another dramatic case. That it is God who rules over these changes, as he rules over everything in this world, is certainly not apparent to everybody. Mary's assertion – and my assertion – is that this too is so.

And my Magnificat Proposition No. 3, which is in fact not derived from the Magnificat itself but from Propositions 1 and 2: Changed people can, and do, change the world; indeed it is largely through changed people that God changes the world. Not only. There are natural processes that can change the world, as the Icelandic volcano with the unpronounceable name has been demonstrating in these last weeks. There are processes that may not be entirely natural but are not attributable to any individual, but only to collective human activity; the general though not undisputed view is that climate change is one of these, although over the centuries and the millennia climate change has taken place without human influence. Of more direct concern to us are changes not to the geographical world, but to human society; and here there are plenty of examples of people who have carried out world-changing work in the name of God – whether it is Moses or Paul in Biblical times, or Martin Luther King or Desmond Tutu in our own day.

It is also noticeable and remarkable how natural and semi-natural events stimulate people to action in such a way that good can come even out of disaster. The vast outpouring of solidarity and assistance in the wake of the Indian Ocean tsunami may stand as an example of filling the hungry with good things; in such an event I see God changing the world through the agency of people with compassion in their hearts.

Others have changed the world without necessarily having been driven to do so through faith in God. Christians played leading roles in the upheavals of 1989/90 in a number of countries, notably in East Germany and Poland, but there were many other people involved who took part without Christian motivation, without any awareness that they were doing the work of God and indeed without any desire or intention to do so. Yuri Gagarin might have seen class or economic interests, or blind, impersonal social forces at work. But for those like Abraham, whom God called to leave his country and his people, or like Mary, who said to the angel "I am the Lord's servant; may it be to me as you have said" [Luke 1,38], it is perfectly clear that this is God's world, and that it is God who brings down rulers from their thrones and lifts up the humble.

God changes people, and God changes the world. Abraham saw it, and Mary saw it, both of them coming from God in their search for God. We who call ourselves Christians already know something of God; but we must all be very much aware that we can come to know him better if our hearts are open and we are ready to allow him to change us. Then each of us, in our own place in God's world, will surely see what part he is calling us to take upon ourselves in the great task of changing the world.

Those who do not see God's traces in the world could do worse than get out their magnifying glasses.