

Sermon on Sunday 23rd December – 4th Sunday of Advent

All Saints Church Wokingham – Revd Canon David Hodgson

Gospel: Luke 1.39-55

I was greatly impressed by this year's Nativity Play at All Saints Primary School. There was very competent singing and acting by 5 year olds and 6 years olds who remembered their lines and entered into it with great gusto and no shadow of a doubt that the message of the story is true as true can ever be – God is with us, was then, is now. One of the things that most impressed me was that Mary had a speaking part! In so many traditional Nativity Plays Joseph gets to do all the talking. But not this time. Mary was the one who argued her case with the Bethlehem innkeepers to be given a room for the night.

It is odd that Mary is so quiet in traditional Nativity plays and that Joseph does the talking – or maybe not that strange I hear at least half of you thinking, given that it took allegedly Christian societies over 1900 years before women generally had an official voice in their political lives – but it's odd because in the actual bible stories of the birth of Jesus, Joseph says nothing – zilch – not a single word falls from Joseph's lips. It's Mary that speaks. Mary talks to the Angel Gabriel you remember when he comes to announce she will have the child Jesus; Mary answers the angel back with a key question: "How can that happen?" Etc you know the rest. And then again when Mary visits her relative Elizabeth, who is also miraculously pregnant with the child who becomes John the Baptist, Mary and Elizabeth share greetings and then: Mary speaks the amazing song which we heard read out in our gospel reading this morning – the Song of Mary, in traditional church language it's called the Magnificat.

Why is Mary's song an amazing song? Everything that Mary says in the Nativity Story in the bible is significant. None of her words are accidental, nothing is there just to pad out the story. So here we have a teenage girl telling the truth about God, what God is like, how God works. Not her dad, not her husband, not a religious leader explaining on her behalf, Mary herself, just as she says "a lowly servant – someone not considered to be important" The words of truth about what God does and is doing by bringing Jesus into the world, this message is spoken by Mary, a teenage girl. That's the first amazing thing about Mary's song – this young woman Mary is given a vital speaking part to tell the world about what God is doing.

But the second amazing thing about Mary's Song is even more amazing! It's the message of the song. What it says about God and about what God does in the world.

The first thing it says about God is that God cares about people who are not considered important. God cares, is deeply interested and concerned for people who have nothing; people who have no kudos or money or power or anything which gives them any importance or any merit in the eyes of the world. But in the eyes of God they are important. And so when people who are considered unimportant do receive attention, when they do find a voice, when they are able to become agents of their own destiny; that is God at work. This is what God does and what God invites us who believe and trust God is with us now and in the future, to be doing.

So for example this month during Advent we have been collecting money at the end of each of our services for the Church Mission Society. And CMS is a Christian organisation dedicated to setting free and empowering people who are not considered important - many of whom have very little resources either material or spiritual – in some of the poorest countries of the world. In the second largest city of the Democratic Republic of Congo, Lubumbashi, there are 3000 children living on the streets. The Anglican Church of Congo runs 5 centres in the city to bring help and hope to street children- providing food, lodging and education, giving street children a sense of self-worth and hope for the future, which keeps them from ending up back on the streets. Our gifts to CMS help provide support and resources to the Anglican Church there to run those centres. This is God at work today, looking with favour and care upon those who are considered least important. We need faith in God, like Mary had, to see this and support

this. When those considered least important, who have no power or wealth or status, and who are the most ignored people, those who are excluded and rejected by others...when they are being cared about, listened to, given respect and the opportunity to be part of the community and the world – that’s God working to save all of us. This is what the Advent cry to be awake and to watch for Christ’s coming is about. This is what’s true about God. An American preacher Cornell West put it like this: “The condition of truth is to allow suffering to speak”. God hears always the cry of the poorest and most ignored. More than that even, we learn from the story of what happened to Jesus how he suffered and was killed, that the very Spirit of God’s self is in the cry of those most ignored and rejected. This is the message Mary sings because she was about to be part of God’s big reveal of what God is like and how God works, being human and living among us.

The next amazing thing this song of Mary says about God is that God is working when proud, arrogant people stop being heard, when powerful people have their power taken away from them and those who were kept low are lifted up, when people who are hungry are given food, and those who are rich are given nothing more. If this sounds radical and upsetting – you are right. It is. When radically inclusive justice and freedom is being gained for those who were previously excluded, ignored and kept back, then God is working.

And that upsets those of us who are doing very nicely thank you without our attitudes and our certainties being challenged, our understanding of history being re-framed; our priorities and our way of life being changed. It can be decidedly upsetting and uncomfortable. Is this really the message of Christmas we might think?

Sometimes we might think that God is working only when our society or community looks like it’s working OK and is generally comfortable: when people obey the law, don’t question the status quo, pay their taxes in full, don’t go on strike, when the majority are more or less happy with their situation, when people generally don’t make a fuss. And yes that’s true as Christian people we do by faith know God’s creative and sustaining Spirit in the world works continually to inspire and encourage us to be co-operative and to take care of one another, to serve one another and to do no harm. The shut-down of Gatwick Airport last week shows only too painfully how vulnerable the working of our society can be when even a few people choose deliberately to break that relationship of trust and co-operation which allows us to go about our daily lives. It might also show what happens when as a society we fail to take enough care of one another to plan and prepare adequately to deal with the consequences of a known risk. So yes, I do believe God is working when we see stability and peace in our societies; but that is not the full story.

But the message of Mary’s Song is that God is working when our societies and communities are in flux; changing in the direction of greater justice, when more and more people are having the opportunity to be heard, to be respected, to receive a just reward for their contribution, and to flourish. When no-one is merely an object in the projects of the lives of others; but when everyone has the freedom and opportunity to be the subject of their own lives. And where that does not happen, when societies go in the wrong direction, so that the powerful are brought down, and the rich are stopped from piling on more and more for themselves, then God is working. God is revealed in Mary’s Song as a God who sweeps aside those ways of doing things which ignored the needs and voices of those considered least important; so that the powerful interests which maintained the old order are side-lined and dismantled.

So for example at our Crib Services tomorrow the collection will be for the charity Christian Aid, another church-based organisation working to bring help to the poorest people in the world. Our donations will go towards emergency help and relief in disaster-struck areas but also towards Christian Aid’s campaigning for action to change the way things are working. Because Christian Aid not only gives food those in need, not only does it teach people to work sustainably for themselves, it also knows that changes have to be made in the way things are organised in the world to stop people suffering poverty. One of their most important campaigns is about climate

change. Climate change we know is already devastating the lives of the poorest people as well as destroying eco-systems; and this year we've seen communities which did not think they were so vulnerable also suffering devastation through extreme weather events. There is time to stop things getting worse if the world takes enough action now. More of our money needs to be invested in renewable energy and less money in fossil fuels. But it means a change and maybe some rich people will not get as rich as they would have got if we carry on as we are. But if we carry on as we are the world will become a much poorer place overall. So Christian Aid is campaigning to ask the banks which look after our money to invest a lot more of the money into renewable energy and less into fossil fuels which push carbon emissions into the air.

You might be surprised that the Christmas story and Mary's Song has something to do with climate change in the 21st century; or street children in the Congo. But it has everything to do with God working in the world to bring hope and help to everyone including those who are considered least important and have the least power.

You might wonder if we have closed our ears to Mary's radical song? It's one of those interesting facts of human life that Mary's Song – the Magnificat – is one of the most listened to songs ever – it has been set to beautiful music by hundreds of composers over the centuries since the Gospel of Luke first appeared, and sung or said in thousands of Christian churches across the world every day. But if it has been one of the most listened to songs, at the same time it has a message which has been one of the most ignored. So often we humans have built our societies and communities on the basis that projecting power and accumulating wealth is more important than caring about those who have least access to the power and the wealth, or who are excluded for whatever convenient reason of politics or economics that suits the powerful and the wealthy, or even the majority who are content to ignore the plight of minorities.

John Bird now Lord John, who founded The Big Issue, the paper which helps the homeless, and incidentally is also a great read in my humble opinion (because you find out stuff about what's going on in the big world out there beyond Wokingham) wrote in this year's Christmas Issue wondering why we can't have a Christmas party that is a political party that tries its hardest to deliver on the promise of Christmas which he wrote "is the contagion of human love for one and all". His comment got me thinking. We don't have a political party like that, but we do have communities in every village, town and city which meet every week in theory at least in order to deliver on the promise of Christmas -it's called the Christian church. The message of Mary's Song sums up the promise of Christmas – God is with us now as then, bringing compassion and justice into the world.