

Introduction

Sometimes I wander into our living room and start watching the TV drama that my wife's already watching. After a few minutes my wife turns to me and asks me a question about what's going on. "How should I know?" I protest. "You're the one watching it. You tell me!"

It's a bit like this with the Christmas story—we've wandered into the drama halfway through. It's not difficult to work out that a child is being born, but we don't know why this might be important. Why are people responding in the way they do? Are we supposed to be happy or sad? What exactly is going on? Fortunately, the Gospel writer Luke is a bit more sympathetic than I am; he fills us in on the story so far.

In the olden days—back before we all binge-watched box sets on Netflix—you had to wait a week between episodes in a TV series. The problem was that by the time the next episode rolled round, you couldn't remember all the twists and turns from the previous week. So programme makers often included a short montage of clips from previous episodes to remind you of what had

come before. Luke does something very much like this at the start of his Gospel.

Luke's Christmas story is the beginning of his presentation of Jesus. But the story of Jesus is in fact the climax of a centuries-long story. You can kind of make sense of Jesus just by reading an account of his life, but if you really want to understand who he is and what he came to do, then you need to know something about what came before. You need to know *the story so far*. Professor Robert Tannehill says, "We cannot understand what the excitement is about unless we realise that ancient hopes, treasured in the hearts of the Jewish people, are coming to fulfilment ... The Gospel of Luke begins in mid-story and immediately makes us aware of that fact."¹

The main way that Luke catches us up is by including four songs in his account of the Nativity—the songs of Mary, Zechariah, the angels and Simeon. These songs provide the soundtrack to the first Christmas. Each one is Luke's equivalent of a montage of previous highlights. They orient us to what's happening in this, the denouement of the drama. So you could think of this book as the programme notes for the musical performance that unfolds in Luke's Christmas story.

It's also significant that Luke chooses to catch us up through songs. There are several other ways in which he could have done it. Matthew does it by quoting from the Old Testament and telling us how these patterns and promises are being fulfilled in the birth of Jesus. John skips the Christmas story altogether and in its place gives us a rich reflection on the Word made flesh. Two good options. But Luke does something different: he curates the first Christmas carol concert.

Luke wants to make our hearts sing. What's happening in Bethlehem is so amazing that it needs to be accompanied by worship. Luke is putting words in our mouths so that we can join the celebration.

My interest in these songs arose because I follow the Divine Office—the pattern of daily liturgy used by the church over the centuries. This means that I recite Zechariah's song each morning when I say Morning Prayer, Mary's song in Evening Prayer, and often Simeon's song in Compline or Night Prayer. The liturgical forms of these songs are commonly known by their opening words in Latin; Mary's song is the *Magnificat*, Zechariah's song is the *Benedictus*, Simeon's is the *Nunc Dimittis*, and *Gloria in Excelsis* is an expanded form of the angels' song. This daily repetition forces you to think hard about the words of each song and how to make them your own. This book arises out of this spiritual routine and my attempts to engage fully with the message of these songs, day by day. As you approach Christmas, my prayer is that they will make your heart sing.

Mary's Song:
The Magnificat

*My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord,
my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour;
he has looked with favour on his lowly servant.*

*From this day all generations will call me blessed;
the Almighty has done great things for me
and holy is his name.*

*He has mercy on those who fear him,
from generation to generation.*

*He has shown strength with his arm
and has scattered the proud in their conceit,*

*Casting down the mighty from their thrones
and lifting up the lowly.*

*He has filled the hungry with good things
and sent the rich away empty.*

*He has come to the aid of his servant Israel,
to remember his promise of mercy,*

*The promise made to our ancestors,
to Abraham and his children for ever.*

Luke 1:26-55

²⁶ *In the sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee, ²⁷ to a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David. The virgin's name was Mary.*

²⁸ *The angel went to her and said, "Greetings, you who are highly favoured! The Lord is with you."*

²⁹ *Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be. ³⁰ But the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, you have found favour with God. ³¹ You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you are to call him Jesus. ³² He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, ³³ and he will reign over Jacob's descendants for ever; his kingdom will never end."*

³⁴ *"How will this be," Mary asked the angel, "since I am a virgin?"*

³⁵ *The angel answered, "The Holy Spirit will come on you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God. ³⁶ Even Elizabeth your relative is going to have a child in her old age, and she who was said to be unable to conceive is in her sixth month. ³⁷ For no word from God will ever fail."*

³⁸ *"I am the Lord's servant," Mary answered. "May your word to me be fulfilled." Then the angel left her.*

³⁹ *At that time Mary got ready and hurried to a town in the hill country of Judea, ⁴⁰ where she entered Zechariah's*

home and greeted Elizabeth. ⁴¹ When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the baby leaped in her womb, and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. ⁴² In a loud voice she exclaimed: "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the child you will bear!" ⁴³ But why am I so favoured, that the mother of my Lord should come to me? ⁴⁴ As soon as the sound of your greeting reached my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy. ⁴⁵ Blessed is she who has believed that the Lord would fulfil his promises to her!"

⁴⁶ And Mary said:

"My soul glorifies the Lord

⁴⁷ and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour,

⁴⁸ for he has been mindful

of the humble state of his servant.

From now on all generations will call me blessed,

⁴⁹ for the Mighty One has done great things for me—
holy is his name.

⁵⁰ His mercy extends to those who fear him,
from generation to generation.

⁵¹ He has performed mighty deeds with his arm;
he has scattered those who are proud in their
inmost thoughts.

⁵² He has brought down rulers from their thrones
but has lifted up the humble.

⁵³ He has filled the hungry with good things
but has sent the rich away empty.

⁵⁴ He has helped his servant Israel,
remembering to be merciful

⁵⁵ to Abraham and his descendants for ever,
just as he promised our ancestors."



1

Noticed

Magnificat

*My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord,
my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour;
he has looked with favour on his lowly servant.*

*From this day all generations will call me blessed;
the Almighty has done great things for me
and holy is his name.*

Luke 1:46-49

*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.*

Christmas is panto season—at least, it is in Britain. It’s very hard to describe the phenomenon of “pantomime” to non-Brits. I usually suggest that people think of everything they know about British character: reserved, polite, stiff upper lip, emotionally repressed... Then imagine the exact opposite of that and put it on a stage.

One of the common themes of pantomimes is a rags-to-riches tale. Every year, somewhere in a British theatre there will be a retelling of Jack and the Beanstalk, the story of a poor boy discovering great riches. Or Aladdin, the street urchin who becomes a prince. But perhaps the greatest rags-to-riches story of them all is Cinderella: the downtrodden, despised, put-upon girl, living her life in the cinders of the kitchen fire, who transforms into a beautiful princess and marries the prince.

Our first Christmas song, Mary’s Magnificat, is a version of the Cinderella story. It’s a rags-to-riches tale. Mary starts at the bottom. God “has been mindful of the humble state of his servant,” she says (Luke 1:48). This is not a humble brag! God hasn’t picked out Mary because of her exemplary humility. She’s speaking of her plight rather than her virtue. Mary’s not simply humble; she’s humbled—even humiliated. She belongs to a defeated nation, under foreign occupation. She lives in a remote backwater in that nation, despised by the cultural elites in the capital. Plus, she’s a young woman in a patriarchal society. Her voice doesn’t count.

But look again. “All generations will call me blessed,” she declares (v 48). She will be honoured for generations to come. We know this isn’t empty rhetoric because here we are, retelling her story in *our* generation. Every school Nativity play is another reminder that each new generation

still calls Mary “blessed”. Galileans like Mary were despised by the Jewish establishment in Jerusalem, and the Jewish establishment was despised by the imperial authorities in Rome. From every angle, Mary is a nobody in the eyes of this world. Yet God has chosen a nobody to be the beginning of something very special.

The first reason that Mary glorifies the Lord (the first “for” in these verses) is that “he has been mindful of the humble state of his servant” (v 48). This could be translated “looked upon” or “noticed”. Nobody at the centre of political power in Rome nor the centre of religious power in Jerusalem had heard of Mary. Not many people in her own village would have known her name. Like millions of ordinary people across the world, Mary doesn’t matter to others. She’s overlooked by the powerful and the wealthy—but not by God. God has been attentive to her humble state.

The only other time that the word “mindful” is used in Luke’s Gospel is in Luke 9:38: “Teacher, I beg you to look at [be mindful of] my son, for he is my only child”. A man with a demon-possessed boy wants Jesus to notice his son’s plight. Jesus does notice and heals the boy. God has noticed the plight of Mary, and he notices the plight of people like her.

The second reason that Mary rejoices (the second “for”) is that “the Mighty One has done great things for me”. It’s the angel Gabriel who has declared those great things to Mary in the story of the *annunciation* (from the Latin word for “announcement”). Lowly Mary is about to give birth to “the Son of the Most High” (1:32). It’s a dramatic reversal of fortunes.

God has chosen Mary *despite* her humble origins. But more than that, God has chosen Mary *because* of her

humble origins. Her one qualification for being the mother of our Lord is that she has no qualifications! God takes the lowly and works through the weak to magnify his own grace and glory. This is why Mary adds, “[And] holy is his name.” This is not a human way of operating; this can only be God at work. In choosing Mary, God is doing something that no one would ever dream of doing.

Mary had no voice. No one had time for her point of view. Yet who’s speaking the words which we’re reading today? Mary! Her voice echoes down across the centuries and reaches up to heaven.

Mary is humbled, lowly, insignificant. Maybe that’s how you feel this Christmas. Remember: God notices. When Hagar—another pregnant woman—was on the run from the torments of her mistress, God met her in the wilderness to reassure her. So Hagar named God, “You are the God who sees me” (Genesis 16:13). God meets you today in his word. God sees you today, even when no one else notices you. And God gives you a voice—a voice he wants to hear.

Reflection

Amidst the vast scene of the world’s problems and tragedies you may feel that your own ministry seems so small, so insignificant, so concerned with the trivial. What a tiny difference it can make to the world that you should run a youth club, or preach to a few people in a church, or visit families with seemingly small result. But consider: the glory of Christianity is its claim that small things really matter and that the small company, the very few, the one man, the one woman, the one child are of infinite worth to God ... The Gospel you preach affects

the salvation of the world, and you may help your people to influence the world's problems. But you will never be nearer to Christ than in caring for the one man, the one woman, the one child. His authority will be given to you as you do this, and his joy will be yours as well.²

Archbishop Michael Ramsey
(1904–1988)