

The 66th Annual Pilgrimage of Our Lady of Walsingham

A Meditation at Solemn Evensong, 6.00pm 12 October 2018
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Meditation 3: Facets of Magnificat

We have been discussing today the 6 Words of Our Lady Saint Mary.

We have considered the first and second, which come from her conversation with Saint Gabriel the Archangel. We have considered the fourth, fifth, and sixth, which come from later episodes in the gospels of Luke and John.

We have skipped the third, because it is the longest, and because we encounter it here in the evening office. It is, of course, the Magnificat.

The Magnificat, Mary's great song of rejoicing and faith. We know it. Certainly if we go to church around Christmas we have heard it. If we sing or say the Office we have recited it. We know this Magnificat.

Maybe we know it too well. Sometimes when a thing is repeated, it can begin to lose its impact, like the Lord's Prayer, or, sadly, the saying of "I love you" to a spouse.

What do we notice about this, the third and most complex word of Mary?

~ A Political Magnificat ~

I notice right away how political it is. It is profoundly political!

Who is God? Mary answers: A God who has turned the whole human structure upside down. A God who scatters the proud and tears the despots from their thrones and starves the greedy rich. A God who lifts up the lowly and fills the hungry and showers mercy on anyone who is brave enough to fear him. That's God, says Mary. God has done it before, and Mary knows that God is doing it again.

But we have come here, Father, for a quiet day, for contemplation, for peace. And these are times when politics made people crazy, and even the word "politics" spoken from a pulpit is enough to set us scanning the edge of the room for the exits.

To be sure, our partisan squabbles have deeply wounded us. The Devil loves our way of doing politics, because it makes it so easy to divide and destroy. But politics rightly understood are also the domain of God, in one part because everything in creation is God's domain. It all belongs to God! You know that. Because God has shared with us a vision for the way things ought to be, both within our hearts and throughout creation, including that most messed-up and complicated and destructive part of creation that we call the human race.

Justice is simply Christian love and charity in its outward expression

Politics is simply justice applied to the community, be that community a household or a parish or a nation or the world.
Mary knows this, and so she sings about it, because it is true.

~ Prophetic Magnificat ~

I also notice that her song is prophetic. By which I mean that Mary is

- Reminding us of who God really is
- Recalling us to our relationship with this God
- Requesting that we pattern our lives on this God

In this sense, we can include Mary in with all the other prophets, major and minor, with Isaiah and Micah and Jeremiah, Like Zechariah, who also had a song of prophecy that was also sung in thanksgiving for a child. That song, the Benedictus, is the highlight of our morning prayer, just as Mary's is the highlight of Evening Prayer. And above all Mary's prophetic song reminds us of Hannah's song from 1 Samuel, which Hannah sings also when she is pregnant. Do you know it? The Magnificat sounds like a remake of Hannah's song: My heart exults in the Lord; my strength is exalted in my God... The bows of the mighty are broken, but the feeble gird on strength. Those who were full have hired themselves out for bread, but those who were hungry are fat with spoil...

So, ok, the Magnificat is prophecy and proclamation. But why this song now? I've often wondered that. But how strange it is to me that she should sing such a song in response to the news of her pregnancy. I have been to baby showers before. I have been invited to hospital and home right after a birth. I have been told by parishioners that they've just found out they're expecting. Sometimes it's great news, and sometimes it's really not seen as good news at all. I have heard both "God has blessed me" as well as "O God, what am I going to do?"

But not once has a woman said to me, "Father, I'm pregnant! God's going to fix our broken social and economic structures!"

How is it that Mary is able to leap from what is happening in her own womb to what is happening and has happened and will happen around the globe? I am in awe of our sister Mary.

~ The Visitation ~

And what does Elizabeth have to do with it? Mary has all the time in her life to sing the Magnificat, and she's got 9 whole months of pregnancy to sing thanksgiving to God. Why now? Why this instant?

For mystics, we hear again and again of a single shattering vision that rewires all the expectations, like Paul on the Damascus Road, or Julian of Norwich and Margery Kempe, or,

like Richeldis of Faverches, who lived 300 years before Julian and Margery and only 30 miles away from Norwich. There must be something in the Norfolk water.

Suddenly, something clicks for Mary. She has had this bizarre conversation with the angel, who said you will get pregnant with God's child, and your cousin is pregnant too. Did Mary set out with haste for the hill country simply to visit and support and share a cup of tea? Or did she go for another reason: to confirm the weird news from the angel? The Annunciation clearly brought her joy: she said so to the Lady Richeldis. But the Annunciation must have been weird, right? Did she wonder, maybe, if she was losing her mind? How could she confirm it, Mary, who as we have seen is really quite practical. The physical changes would not be evident for a while. There were no pregnancy test kits available from the Walgreen's in Nazareth. There were no Walgreen's!

She goes in haste, in haste! St. Luke tells us — and she bursts through the door and Elizabeth turns and Mary sees her belly. And Elizabeth knows, and even John the Baptist hidden in Elizabeth's womb knows, and so Mary knows that all of this has come to pass.

And for Mary there is an integration in her soul, a convergence of things known and things suspected, of intuition weaving into evidence, of the bringing together of all these elements, the whispers of an angel, the laughter of a cousin, the leaping of a child unborn, the agony of a people oppressed, the hunger of the hungry for mercy, the centuries of pleading for redemption, and the great cities of Jerusalem and Rome as well as the squalid village of Nazareth with all those gossips whispering about her and Joseph, the Gabriel's greeting and Elizabeth's greeting — favored one, full of grace, blessed is she who believe that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord. Blessed. Blessed. Blessed.

And so she sang.

~ Pilgrim Mary ~

It occurs to us that Mary went on a journey from her home to a certain place. She went with a spiritual purpose — to explore some facet of her life with God. It occurs to us that Mary's visit to Elizabeth was a pilgrimage. Although she carried Christ within her, she needed to travel the landscape, to get away from the familiar rhythm of her life, to shift her perspective, and to share this with Elizabeth and with the unborn John. And then she could see in a new way the Christ that she already carried. She could see that, though he was hidden away within her, that it had everything to do with the healing of creation.

Here we are as pilgrims. Some of us have come far, and some not so far. But we join in a noble and ancient pattern of pilgrimage. Compostella, Rome, Jerusalem, Canterbury, Walsingham.

We have travelled the landscape, to get away from the familiar rhythm of our life, to shift our perspective, and to share with one our delight in this mystery. I pray that you will see in a new way the Christ that you already carry within you. I hope that you can see that,

though he is hidden away within you, that it has everything to do with the healing of creation.

Our Lady of Walsingham, show us always the joy of the annunciation, and pray for us.
Amen.