Advent 4 2021

Micah 5:2-5a

Luke 1:39-55

I wonder if you can work out what these three popular songs have in common?

*Lucy in the sky with diamonds* by the Beatles

*Waterloo* by Abba

*God only knows* by the Beach Boys

Any thoughts?

Well, they have all at some time been banned from being played on the radio.

*Lucy in the sky with diamonds* for what were considered blatant references to drug use; *Waterloo* during the Gulf War due to its connotations with armed conflict; and *God only knows* because back in 1966 simply using the word God in a pop song was deemed to be blasphemous.

And if you think that is all a bit over the top, listen to these assessments of another very well-known song.

E. Stanley Jones, a Methodist preacher and scholar, called it "the most revolutionary document in the history of the world." William Temple, Archbishop of Canterbury in the 1940s, instructed missionaries to poverty-stricken India never to mention the words of this song in public because it could incite riots in the streets. And Baptist writer, William Shurden, said that, when you read the lyrics of this song, you "sniff the powder of dynamite."

What song am I talking about?

Well, it’s the Magnificat – Mary’s song – which you heard just now in our reading from Luke’s gospel. The Magnificat is so-named, of course, because magnificat is the first word – meaning magnify – in Latin version of this song. This song is sung by an unmarried teenage peasant girl who has just found out she is pregnant, a girl we know as Mary. And Mary is a very special person chosen by God for a very special role in his plan for the salvation of the world.

Step for moment with me inside these ancient words, and hear the voice of this young mother as she announces that a new day has dawned, both for her and for us. She glorifies God as she sings of what he is going to do for the world through her.

This song – like much of what we read in the Bible – is both a comfort for us and a challenge to us. You can divide the song into two sections. The first section – verses 46-50 – brings us comfort, and the second section - verses 51-55 – challenges us. You might want to look at the text on your service sheet.

We could call the first section “The gift of God’s grace”. This is the comfort.

In verses 46-50, we see something wonderful and true about God: He loves the underdog, the disqualified, and the unimpressive. Mary stands before the Lord just as we do - needy, flawed, with nothing to merit his favour, nothing to earn but judgment. She is amazed at a God who knows her so well and chooses her anyway.

That all sounds fairly uncontroversial, I hear you say. Why all those warnings? Nothing so revolutionary in that.

But hold on. The second part is coming. This is where Mary turns her attention to world and its systems, and interprets the meaning of Christ's coming for this earth. We could call this section “God’s transforming power”. This is the challenge.

In v. 51-55, Mary sings of radical reversals of what our world values, shifting everything in order to bring God's justice for his people. Three groups of people will be impacted we are told: the helpless, the humble and the hungry.

Firstly, in verse 51, we learn that God will rescue the **helpless.**

*He has shown strength with His arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.*

Mary is just a young girl, not a political analyst. She is standing in the living room of an older relative in the hill country of Judea, singing this song. But she sees it all coming. Her boy-child will up-end all the centres of power humans have established on this earth. This baby is God's signal to power-brokers in every strata of society: the end of human self-centred ambition is at hand.

Secondly, in verse 52, God will exalt the **humble.**

*He has brought down the powerful from their thrones and lifted up the lowly.*

Mary's song means we need to reverse our ambitions if we want to flourish in God's world. We need to stop buying into the idea that if we're going to get anywhere in life, we've got to be assertive and stand up for our rights! There's a higher law at work than the "law of the jungle." Jesus gives it to us in Luke 14: *Everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and the one who humbles himself will be exalted.*

Thirdly, in verse 53, God will fill the **hungry**.

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

Mary’s words here do refer to the physically needy of this world, to those without food, but they also refer to the spiritually needy, to those who are conscious of the God-shaped hole in their lives. Hungry people have one focus—where to find food. Deep inside them humans also have the sense that whatever else in life they have, they **must** know God?

So, in this song – this revolutionary song - Mary announces that a new day has dawned, both for her and for us. She glorifies God as she sings of what he is going to do for the world through her.

What we need to understand is that these promises are come in two stages.

There is the promise of the new heaven and the new earth at the end of time, when God will make all things new in his kingdom. This is the hope which we share with all those who follow Christ as their Lord and Saviour.

But there is also the promise of a foretaste of his kingdom here and now, and, as I said earlier, there is in this promise for us both comfort and challenge.

We receive the blessings and encouragement of being God’s people and this brings us comfort.

Personally, Mary stands before the Lord just as we do. We too are needy, flawed, with nothing to merit His favour, nothing to earn but judgment, but her words remind us that the church of Jesus Christ is for people who feel their own emptiness. Here's a gift you won't find under any tree this Christmas - the gift of God's grace – his unconditional love - in Jesus Christ, who has come for each and every one of us.

BUT

Looking at the big picture, we also need to remember that God loves everyone else in this world too. We are therefore also called to be his agents of change in offering his blessing and his comfort and his encouragement to those around us – to a needy world.

God loves the forgotten and the passed over. He shows mercy to those who don't deserve it. He chooses the lowly over the proud, and he finds the hungry and fills them. God is on the side of those who can't take care of themselves. And he calls on us to play our part. He calls on us to seek humility, not glory. To labour for the Lord, not ourselves. To stop caring who gets the credit. To give without expecting anything in return.

This is the challenge. What are we doing for the forgotten and the passed over, for those who cannot take care of themselves? What are we going to do to be God’s agents of change in our world today?

Are you now beginning to *sniff the powder of dynamite* in this message? I hope so.

There are so many areas of our life today where those who cannot speak up for themselves are finding it increasing difficult to cope, or even survive. Health and social care. The benefits system. Housing. Training and employment. The divisions between different groups in society and between different parts of the country. And the pandemic has just made things even worse.

What can we do?

We can write to our MP. Some MPs are more proactive than others, but they do take notice when their constituents lobby them about particular issues.

Let me give you one small example. Our local MP Mike Amesbury tabled his school uniforms bill in February last year after winning a Private Members' bill ballot, and as a result of lobbying from his constituents. The bill will help families across England struggling with uniform costs, because schools must now keep rules regarding branded clothing items to a minimum, and uniform suppliers must give the highest priority to cost and value for money. This bill has just become law.

We can also give financial or practical support to charities which are looking to change the world we live in.

Again, let me give you a small example. Crisis is a national charity for people experiencing homelessness. It offers year-round education, employment, housing and well-being services. It also campaigns to end homelessness for good, by suggesting possible solutions, including how long it will take and how much it will cost.  This is just one of hundreds of charities which can give us the opportunity to make a difference, and to become agents of change for God.

And what about discussing these issues with friends and family, and especially with children and grandchildren? They are the leaders and influencers of tomorrow.

Above all, let me suggest that if the message which we preach, and the actions which we take, in our world in 2021, do not sound revolutionary, do not upset those with power and influence, do not bring into question the existing structures, then perhaps we are not simply not radical enough. And if there isn’t a *sniff of the powder of dynamite* – why not?

Oscar Romero was Archbishop of San Salvador in the 1970s, during a time of great political and social turmoil in his country. He spoke out courageously against violence, and supported the demands of the poor for economic and social justice. He became increasingly unpopular with the authorities, but, despite receiving threats, he refused to be silenced. On 24 March 1980, he was assassinated in his cathedral whilst presiding at mass.

Let me finish with some words of his:

*he essence of the church lies in its mission of service to the world, in its mission to save the world from in its totality, and of saving it in history, here and now. The church exists to act in solidarity with the hopes and joys, the anxieties and sorrows, of men and women. Like Jesus, the church is sent to ‘bring good news to the poor, to heal the contrite of heart, to seek and save what is lost’,*

Amen