

Luke writes good poetry! In the first two chapters of his gospel he gives us three poems which have resonated down the centuries and are still part of regular Christian worship today. The liturgy for Morning Prayer includes the Benedictus, Evening Prayer has the Magnificat, and we say the Nunc Dimittis at Compline. Each is identified by its first word in Latin, not so familiar for us as it was for the monks, nuns and clergy who said them in their daily Offices for 1500 years before it was permissible to have services in English. The Nunc Dimittis is Simeon's lovely prayer after meeting the infant Jesus: 'Lord, now you let your servant depart in peace'. The Benedictus is what Zechariah said when he regained the power of speech after his son John was born: 'Blessed be the Lord, the God of Israel, for he has visited and redeemed his people'. And the Magnificat is Mary's song: 'My soul magnifies the Lord', which is our gospel for today.

Zechariah was a priest and Simeon was a pious elderly man who would regularly have participated in worship. Both were thoroughly familiar with the scriptures, in particular the Psalms. They would know other poems of praise and prayer. It would have been relatively easy for them to have spoken in a similar way at a time of great emotion. But have you ever wondered how Mary came to speak the Magnificat?

We know very little about Mary. The earliest books in the New Testament are Paul's Epistles – and Paul does not mention Jesus's mother by name anywhere. The closest he gets is the phrase in our second reading: 'God sent his son, born of a woman, born under the law'. Paul is only interested in Christ, and he makes this reference simply to emphasise that Jesus was properly Jewish (born under the law) because his mother was. The earliest Christians clearly didn't think Mary was particularly special. She had several other children, the disciples knew her, John took care of her after the crucifixion, and she was with the group in the upper room after the ascension. It wasn't until much later that stories started to circulate about her, initially in various writings (the apocryphal gospels) which were too unreliable to be incorporated in the New Testament. And nothing at all is definitively known about her parents, whom we call Joachim and Anna. But people like stories, and so the legends grew and multiplied.

If we strip all the stories away and think about Mary at the time that she visited Elizabeth (John's mother and Zechariah's wife), all we know is that she was a young woman and that she was engaged to Joseph, who was a carpenter. Neither he nor Mary were of any significant social standing. Joseph may have been able to read a little, but he was probably better at arithmetic, which he needed for his trade. Despite lots of later paintings – Mary being taught by her mother, or reading a prayer book at the moment of the annunciation – it's unlikely that she could read at all. So how did she create this magnificent poem?

Well – did she? Or did Luke put words into her mouth? Words which are very similar to a much earlier song of praise and thanksgiving. The words said in the Temple by Hannah, who had given birth to Samuel after having been barren for many years. Her song begins: 'My heart exults in the Lord; my strength is exalted in my God', and goes on to describe the mighty acts of the Lord: 'those who were full have hired themselves out for bread, but those who were hungry are fat with spoil'; 'the Lord makes poor and makes rich, he brings low, he

also exalts'. It is possible that Mary had heard these words read in the synagogue and had remembered them, although at her age they would have had far less impact than on her cousin Elizabeth, who had also been barren for many years. Or did Luke the gospel-writer decide that Hannah's song was an excellent model for what Mary might have said to her cousin? After all, no-one was taking notes at the time.

It is a magnificent poem, wherever it came from, and I don't intend to spoil or belittle it. If it had been preserved in a different context it would have been understood from the start as a manifesto for political and economic revolution. The Jews had lived for centuries under foreign occupation and tyranny; the only people who became rich were those who collaborated with the enemy. Jews who faithfully followed the Law and believed that God would ultimately deliver them into freedom would certainly have recognised themselves as the poor. Declaimed in public by a popular leader – male, of course – it could have been the catalyst for an uprising.

And that is the context in which I read it today. I'm not advocating an uprising. But these central verses could have been written directly to address the situation we now find ourselves in. 'He has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. He has brought down the mighty from their thrones and lifted up the lowly. He has filled the hungry with good things and sent the rich away empty.' We only have to look around. A proud Russian ruler who is killing thousands of Ukrainians and his own troops because of the thoughts of his heart. Mighty men who have been brought down across the Atlantic and here – but we find ourselves rudderless. Business leaders who put their own bonuses and dividends above the needs and interests of their customers. A pending climate catastrophe brought about by decades of ignorance and carelessness. A cost-of-living crisis which is a combination of all of the above. We face a period of political, economic and environmental instability like nothing we have seen before.

We may feel like victims in all of this. But we in this congregation are not the people who will suffer most. As Christians we are the people who have a responsibility to build God's kingdom in the world. We have a duty to do whatever we can to make those verses live, and we have the intelligence and the means to reach out to others, to help, to resist unfairness and to insist on change. We must work to make Mary's song our own.