

Here we are, five days from Christmas, and at last what most people recognise as ‘the Christmas story’ has finally appeared in our gospel reading. But we’ve already moved beyond the beginning. Gabriel has appeared to Mary out of sight, as it were. His message has been delivered out of our hearing, and we must recall Mary’s response for ourselves: that tremendous ‘Yes!’ that has shaped the rest of history. I wonder how it sounded. Was it tremulous, apprehensive, wondering, confident?

Now Mary has set off to visit her relative Elizabeth, who is also miraculously pregnant. Maybe she went to share her extraordinary news. Maybe she went to avoid the gossip in her own village. Maybe it was just easier for her to be elsewhere while her parents and Joseph came to terms with the new situation. Maybe Elizabeth, a very old woman to be enduring a first pregnancy, has asked for her help. So many questions – and no answers.

Mary and Elizabeth would have had a great deal to talk about in the three months that Mary stayed. Elizabeth, the wiser and more experienced woman, would have taught Mary many useful things, and Mary, the teenager, would have been able to help Elizabeth with many tasks that the older woman would find increasingly difficult as her pregnancy advanced. We hear nothing of this time, just a description of their meeting, but what a meeting that was. We can picture Mary hurrying towards Elizabeth, the huge hug, the standing-back to look at each other, the tears and the joy, and then Mary’s song of praise, which has been a part of daily Christian worship from its earliest beginnings. God does wonderful things, as Mary says, but have you ever wondered whether a newly-pregnant teenage girl would actually say this? Or, if you are being infuriatingly curious, how the gospel writer knew all about it, down to the very words that were said?

There’s a precedent, which provides a very helpful clue. If we go back a thousand years, we find another woman who has had a son after many years of infertility. This was Hannah, the mother of Samuel. When Hannah came to the Temple to place her son in God’s service, as she had promised, she sang a song of praise.

*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...The Lord...brings low, he also exalts, he raises up the poor from the dust, he lifts the needy from the ash-heap.*

1 Sam.2, 1, 4-5, 7-8

The scholars tell us that these were not just Hannah’s words. She was reciting a hymn of praise which had already been part of Jewish tradition for generations. Words change gradually across the centuries, but the meaning and the intention is the same. Mary praises God in a song she would have heard many times in the synagogue and maybe at home. It’s a much more credible explanation than supposing that the words just popped into Mary’s head at that moment. It also explains how the gospel writer could write this into his story. He too would have been familiar with the hymn.

Elizabeth surely knew the song too, especially as her husband was a priest, read from the Temple scrolls and regularly took part as a leader of worship. In fact some scholars wonder if perhaps it was Elizabeth who spoke the ‘Magnificat’. She and Mary would both have known that Hannah was also a barren woman whose son was a gift from God and an answer to prayer. The parallel with Elizabeth would have been obvious. But no-one knows, and it doesn’t matter.

'Be that as it may', as my mother would say when she was losing the thread of a discussion and wanted to get back onto solid ground. It is a most tremendous, magnificent hymn. We often point out how Jesus ignores or overturns conventional priorities. This song demonstrates that God operates in the same way, and has done from the very beginning, turning human hierarchies and assumptions upside-down. It's a blueprint for revolution of a very particular kind. This is not the replacement of one set of rulers who exploit the underclass by another set of rulers who either carry on exploiting the same underclass or create a slightly different one that they can take advantage of. This is the hymn that has inspired saints, motivated martyrs and underpinned modern liberation theology. This is why totalitarian regimes have to suppress Christianity, or permit its existence only in a rigidly edited form. This is the plan for creating the kingdom of heaven.

This hymn is sung or said in cathedrals, churches, religious communities and in private prayer by millions of people around the world, every day of the year. What would that world be like if everyone who said the words really listened to them, took them seriously and tried, as servants of God, to put them into practice? It would take amazing courage, but just suppose we took the risk. What a world we would have. What a Christmas we would celebrate.