

Mary's joy

Sarah Gowty
16th December 2007 Advent 3

Isaiah 35:1-10; Song of Mary; James 5:7-10; Matthew 11:2-11

Today we celebrate Advent 3 and light the pink candle on the Advent wreath. The theme for Advent 3 is joy and in the Magnificat, the Song of Mary, we experience the joy of Mary as she prepares for the birth of her first child and her rejoicing at the greatness of God. During this time of Advent, we too prepare, like Mary, for the birth of Jesus and share in her joy.

The readings today from Isaiah, James and Mathew also give us plenty to be joyful about. The first reading from Isaiah is repeated or reflected in the Gospel story from Mathew. God is coming and he will turn the natural order of things on its head.

In Isaiah, we are told that God is coming and the blind will see, the lame will walk and the people of God will walk freely without fear (35.5-6). "Everlasting joy shall be upon their heads; they shall obtain joy and gladness, and sorrow and sighing shall flee away" (35.10). It is time to rejoice in the coming of the Lord.

This message is repeated in Mathew's Gospel, along with an important message that is often overlooked in the excitement and anticipation of the coming of the Lord. John the Baptist, who has been preparing people for the coming of the Messiah, is sitting in prison when he hears what Jesus is doing and sends a message with his disciples just to confirm that this man, who he believes is the Messiah, really is who he says he is.

While some read this as doubt in John (see FD Bruner, *The Christbook: Matthew 1-12*, 2004, p. 509), one can understand John's momentary confusion. Here is a man he knows to be the Messiah doing the things that are consistent with the Isaiah reading: the blind can see, the lame can walk, the deaf can hear, and the poor are no longer oppressed (Matthew 11:5). But Jesus did not come with the pomp, glamour or military might associated with kings — again turning things on their head.

We have all experienced this confusion when, in anticipation of an event, change or person, our expectations and imaginations can get a little carried away and there is a momentary confusion when we realise the mistake we have made. The message for us is not to be blinded by our own imaginings or expectations. After all, this man, our Messiah, came to us in the humblest of ways, as a baby, born to people of little consequence except to God who knew, and those of us who came to know, them as the earthly parents of the Christ child, Emmanuel, God with us.

Mary is integral to the Christmas story, to Christ's story. During Advent we have the privilege of sharing with Mary the expectation, anticipation, joy, and praise that is expressed in the Magnificat. However, I wonder in the excitement of the coming of our Lord, how often we truly reflect on Mary's story? It is a story of the simplest kind, a human story, a woman's story. Mary, a young woman (most likely barely of child bearing age) — in a time when women were considered the property of her nearest male relation, usually father, husband or son — is given news that will turn her life upside down. Not only is she to carry a child out of wedlock, a child that is not that of her future husband, but that God has chosen.

It is our ability to understand Mary's story, to relate to her joy and praise, and our collective knowledge that our Messiah is coming, that continues to keep Mary's story relevant today. It is not in the details of her virginity, purity or divinity, but in the very real story of an expectant parent, for we are all that parent, waiting with Mary and rejoicing in the Christmas story. So as we prepare and await the coming of our Messiah, let us rejoice with Mary in the greatness of the Lord. Let us be courageous like Mary, willing to step outside the safety of the

social norm for the greater good. Let us put our trust in God that we will be able to walk that highway, that Holy Way, where we too might be kept from going astray.

I want to conclude by reading a reflection on Mary from an Indonesian theologian Marianne Katoppo, who captures beautifully everything I have been trying so clumsily to portray:

Thinking of Mary, I do not exalt in her supposed purity, for that is too narrow a perspective which does her no justice. / see her in the wider context of love and self-giving. I admire and appreciate her sensitivity to social injustices and her readiness to take moral risks for the sake of a needed social change. That is on one level. On another level, see Mary as the pre-eminent model of humanity, growing into the full image of God. As the receptive virgin (receptive to the action of God) and the creative mother (sharing the mission of bringing the good news of salvation to the world), she is the model, not only for woman, but also for man. She is the new human being (man-woman) receptive before God who calls her/him to be the [image of God].

Human liberation often seems to be a grim and joyless struggle. The Magnificat shows otherwise. And I exult in the fact ... that this Mary, upon her encounter with God bursts out into this great song of thanksgiving and joy given to God, who liberates through the oppressed themselves. (Marianne Katoppo in *The Bible through Asian Eyes*, Masao Takenaka and Ron O'Grady, eds, 1991, p.80.