

Christ-like revolution

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Fourth Sunday of Advent — 23 December 2012

Luke 1.39-56

Wednesday's carol service included songs about Mary. Today's reading from Luke includes a song *by* Mary.

And it's radical stuff—revolutionary in fact. When we hear it, we can easily miss how radical it is; we can be captured by the poetry and miss the force of the words. Mary's song proposes to upset the established régime. God will be merciful to those in awe of God and, by implication, not so merciful to those who aren't. God's strength brings disarray and confusion to those who are proud, arrogant and vainglorious in their thinking and ideas. God topples the powerful and lifts up the lowly. God feeds the physically, emotionally and spiritually hungry with good things, and sends the rich, the self-satisfied, away empty. God helps his servant people and fulfils his promise to be their God forever.

With words such as these, it's small wonder that oppressive régimes have from time-to-time banned the public reading of the *Magnificat*. In British India, early in the nineteenth century, the British East India Company banned the public recitation of the *Magnificat*. At differing times, it's been banned at least in Guatemala, Argentina and in the Philippines under Marcos.

The song is called the *Magnificat* from the Latin version of its first words, *Magnificat anima mea Dominum*—my soul magnifies the Lord.

Mary has the astonishing news that God is sending the Messiah as her child. Pregnant, she goes to visit her older relative Elizabeth, who is also expecting a child. Elizabeth salutes Mary with the prophetic words, "Blessed are you among women and blessed is the fruit of your womb."

Mary responds with her great hymn of praise.

Chris spoke two weeks ago of the Song of Zechariah, the *Benedictus*, as a summary of God's promises, especially as they would be expressed in the life of John the Baptiser, Zechariah's son. The *Benedictus* has been included in the church's morning prayer and the *Magnificat* included in evening prayer at least since the sixth century. They became very familiar to Anglicans through the daily services of the *Book of Common Prayer*.

It's unlikely that Mary composed the song on the spot; she was probably illiterate; there would have been no one there to take the song down in shorthand! Yet these are words that Mary might well have said, reflecting what was in her heart. Perhaps, years later, Mary shared her story with her son's disciples and these words were written down then.

The *Magnificat* typifies much of the Gospel of Luke. In chapter 4, for example, Jesus declares himself to be anointed by the Spirit, "to bring good news to the poor, to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind and to let the oppressed go free." In chapter 6, Jesus says, "Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God. Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you will be filled."

The *Magnificat* begins as a song of joy and praise—with the extraordinary claim that Mary's soul has 'magnified' the Lord. We mere humans can make God greater—the almighty creator, the Most High—as, enabled by the Spirit, we make God greater within with our own lives—in our souls, as the song says.

Mary praises her Lord as the one who keeps promises, the faithful God, whose “mercy is on those who fear him, from generation to generation ... according to the promise he made to our forebears, Abraham and his seed for ever.”

I began with the claim that the *Magnificat* is revolutionary. We’re familiar with political revolution, the overthrow of governments by rebellion. This happened recently in Tunisia, Libya and Egypt; there is a desperate struggle now underway in Syria.

Two feelings particularly contribute to revolution.

The first is *hope*—hope for change, hope for better things, for freedom and a new life. Hope in God is at the core of Jewish and Christian faith. It’s the response of faith. As Hebrews tells us, “faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.” (Hebrews 11.1)

On the other hand revolution, or at least revolt, can come from *despair*—despair that there will ever be change, there will ever be freedom. Rather than rotting under an evil regime, rebels strike out to kill as many of the enemy as they can, even though they die in the attempt.

Mary’s song is a song of hope, not despair, despite Rome enslavement and the burden of corrupt kings and governors. The song’s hopefulness is founded in God, who promises deliverance, who is faithful and not fickle or untrustworthy. “For surely I know the plans I have for you,” the Lord says through the prophet Jeremiah, “plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope.”

This month, December 2012, is the 20th anniversary of the first ordination of women to the priesthood in our Diocese of Canberra and Goulburn. The ordinations were a revolutionary act, upsetting the established order of things. After years of debate and struggle, the women and their supporters may well have given up in despair. But they didn’t, because they had hope—they trusted in God for a better day, for new things.

A teenager who begins to realise that he or she is gay is faced with the prospect of great personal change—these days we call it ‘coming out’. Like other revolutionary change there can be hope and the thrill of self-discovery. Or there can be rejection, fear, despair, and sometimes suicide. The suicide risk is very real. There’s been a campaign in recent years with the message, “It gets better!” to encourage young people in distress to have hope in their futures.

Revolution means radical change. The *Magnificat* changes the order of things. God turns things upside down, and puts the bottom on top and the top on the bottom. “Come the revolution”, brothers and sisters, the poor are on top and the rich are on the bottom—or gone altogether. God respects, exalts, feeds, helps and remembers the poor. And in Mary, the Lord God chose a humble country girl to be the one most “Blessèd among women.”

We are revolutionary, it seems to me, when our words and actions contradict the failings of the prevailing culture. We are revolutionary when we live simply and don’t succumb to materialism. We’re revolutionary when we choose a life of service, even though it doesn’t pay well, if at all. We are revolutionary when we seek the presence of a God who some say does not exist. We’re revolutionaries when we serve others voluntarily, even in the smallest way.

Revolutionary life in Christ is expressed in the fruits of God’s Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control (Galatians 5.22). And, yes, we are revolutionary when we campaign and protest in the public arena in support of generosity, peace, neighbourliness and mercy.

One word brings all this together for me, and that word is *humility*. In Mary's song, God exalts the humble and humbles the exalted.

Many of us heard *Ordo Virtutum* sung here a few years ago — a musical drama about the virtues, by medieval mystic Hildegard of Bingen. In her play, Hildegard has a Queen of the Virtues, who is *Humility*.

In his great sixth-century rule of guidance for monks and nuns, Benedict devotes a great deal of space to teaching twelve degrees of humility for those grow spiritually. In a brief paraphrase, they are:

- to guard against sin;
- to prefer God's will above our own;
- to be obey one another;
- to persist in the face of injury and hardship;
- to confess our faults to each other;
- be content with the least of everything;
- to regard others as greater than ourselves;
- to set aside our own preferences for the common good;
- to be moderate and gentle in speech and laughter (steps 9, 10 and 11); and
- to be aware of the greatness and holiness of God, in whose presence we walk daily.

You could describe such humility as *selfless love*—which is to say *Christ-like*.

In Advent we have been challenged to examine our lives, repent and change, and to review our priorities and commitments. As Advent concludes, we can gather all this together by simply asking ourselves, and asking God prayerfully, “How can I be more Christ-like?”

To be Christ-like, to imitate and follow Jesus as he would have us follow, is revolutionary indeed.