

Advent Four – 2018

Vulnerability is very unfashionable today, indeed it probably has always been so to some extent. Men particularly have not wanted to be seen as vulnerable. I can see that as I endeavour to speak about vulnerability in leadership to 'would be' army officers. And why would women want to be vulnerable given the way they have been treated and still are. So why does it have a particular place in Christian spirituality? Should it be rejected as an anachronism, a relic from another era? I think we reject it at our peril, because of its central place in our Christian ethic, but we need to be careful.

At the time of the Reformation Martin Luther wrote 'We held Christ to be our angry judge, and Mary our mercy seat, in whom alone was our trust and refuge.' This thinking was rejected by many reformers but in doing so they rejected all things Marian, which has been to the detriment of the Church in our tradition. GK Chesterton, the author of the Fr Brown stories once wrote: 'The Reformer is always right about what's wrong. However, he's often wrong about what is right.' This statement rings true when it comes to matters concerning Mary, the mother of Jesus. The reformers were certainly right about problems concerning devotion to Mary but they were often wrong in the way they dealt with them. Many spoke of Mary as a sack or a Saffron bag, she was merely the means by which Christ was born, nothing more. Bishop Latimer, himself a reformer who would be burnt at the stake under the reign of Mary I, offered some balance when he wrote of Mary: 'Just as a Saffron Bag after it has been emptied of its contents doth ever after savour and smell of the sweet saffron that it contained.' Mary is quite clearly more than just the means.

Martin Luther would go on to write a lengthy work on the Magnificat which we heard this morning. In it he stresses Mary's representative quality and this is I believe is a correct way for us to approach her. In doing so we stand in a centuries old tradition in which Christians have kept coming back to the idea that what happens in Mary is what *has* to happen to some degree in each of us.

Rowan Williams writing on the Magnificat says 'We need perhaps to understand that when we praise someone or something else we magnify them, make them bigger in the sense of giving them more room: we step back, we put our preoccupations and goals and plans aside so as to let the reality of something else live in us for that moment, find room in us. Real praise is about forgetting ourselves, even my feelings, so that the sheer beauty and radiance of something beyond myself comes alive

in me.' This is what Mary is all about, she made room for God in such a way that God's son was conceived in her, love became a reality in her; and this is what we celebrate in the coming days. This is our calling too, to give God room so that we may be changed.

The Magnificat is a challenge to us to take up this calling. If the love which is God is indeed conceived within us how will it be manifest? Luther's fear of Christ the angry judge became so acute that his spiritual director recommended to him that he concern himself more with the love of Christ and told him to study the scriptures. This reading led Luther to the great thesis of the Reformation, that it is our *faith* in Christ that makes us right with God. The Magnificat shows us how that faith is lived, what it is to let God loose in our lives and in the world.

I can only imagine that Luther must have felt that his life had been turned upside down. As he came to know the love of the Christ he once feared he was confronted with Mary. The one whom he once looked to for mercy was now so much more: a prophetic figure, proclaiming the reversal of fortunes scattering the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. Bringing down the powerful from their thrones lifting up the lowly; filling the hungry with good things, and sending the rich packing

Mary and Elizabeth represent the vulnerable and yet in them we don't just see the submission and obedience so often spoken of in popular piety but women who refuse to allow their vulnerability to in any way diminish them. In fact completely the opposite is the case. As Advent draws to a close and we look to the life of Mary, we honour her not just as the mother of Jesus, but as a person who in her own right demonstrates to us that the vulnerability of faith is indeed a source of strength. Mary demonstrates Christian vulnerability, in a particular way. Sarah Coakley writing in a similar vein to Rowan argues that giving room for God doesn't reinforce subjugation, but gives strength to resist it! We become vulnerable because we desire God. And when we desire God and sit with this desire we realise we are being buoyed by God's desire for us. We are empowered, if we cease to set the agenda, and make space for God to be God. This is what we see in Mary's Magnificat.

In Mary we can see a person whose faith projects us into the future, a new world! Without faith in the future we would not choose to have a child. In Mary visiting Elizabeth we can see her faith in community. For us without faith in our fellow citizens we would not have a free society. In Mary we can see someone whose complete faith in God brings heaven

to earth and earth to heaven, this makes for the paradox of power and vulnerability and it lies at the heart of our Advent vision. Amen.