Sermon BVM 15.08.21 SL

Every evening, at every Evensong, we sing Mary’s song again, the Magnificat, ‘My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord’. What are we doing two thousand years on, saying or singing the song of this startled, teenage girl. It is a very personal song ‘**My** soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord, **my** spirit rejoices in God my saviour’. This is the reaction of a hitherto anonymous girl, from an unknown family in a backwater village of Roman occupied Palestine, who has been told that she is to become a mother in the period of betrothal, and not just of a child, but a child who so completely fulfils God’s will that we dare to call him Son of God. This is indeed a unique. A song for an unheard of situation, yet we go on making these words our own every time we say or sing them. What can it possibly mean to intone ‘Behold from henceforth all generations will call me blessed?

As another scholar has said ‘I make Mary’s Magnifcat my own because I need to make her mind my own’. Of course Mary’s situation is unlike any other, it is to her that the promise is made, the announcement that she will bear in her body the redeeemer of humankind- Mary’s destiny can’t be shared in that sense. But what is particularly true about Mary’s self-understanding is universally true- for what Mary understands from her story, is the way God works, the way God always works. Mary comes to understand that in her experience is encapsulated the very way God acts, the way God is for all his children. He is a God who looks with favour on the lowly, a God who favours those who make no claims for themselves- the empty-handed are at the very heart of Mary’s experience. Mary comes to see that the way God deals with her is the way God deals throughout history. God who time and again chooses to lift up the lowly, to work through those of no account, and who brings to naught the proud, the wealthy and the powerful. A terrible warning for us in a first world nation, and in the richest part of that nation too. Mary’s words, which we make our own in acknowledging her insights, are revolutionary. They turn us upside down. To say or sing these words is devastating to the assumptions by which we live in our materialist culture where so much depends upon status, schooling, bank balance or address.

But what is perhaps strange to note- and apologies if this sounds rather pedantic, is that in Mary’s song, all the verbs describing God’s action are in the past tense.

He..has looked with favour, has done great things, has shown strength, has scattered the proud, has brought down the mighty, has filled the hungry with good things, has sent the rich away empty,

Really? - is that what our world looks like today? With the poorest in our cities the most vulnerable to Covid, young black men in London nine times more likely to be stopped and searched than their white counterparts, with the Taliban tearing through Afghanistan and all that implies for future global terror, with the children of Yemen dying of diseases we thought long past because of warfare waged by weapons sold by us.

Really?-Has God really looked with favour, scattered the proud, brought down the mighty, filled the hungry with good things, sent the rich empty away?

Or are we in Mary’s position? She believed, she committed herself so totally in the outcome of her Son’s mission that she sings this song sure that it has happened. Dare we, two thousand years later, sing confidently this song with all its implications for us and for the worlds we inhabit?

We shall sing her words this morning too- in the hymn by Timothy Dudley-Smith- ‘Tell out my soul the greatness of the Lord’. It’s a stirring, rousing hymn- but dangerous, unless that is, we are prepared to bring to our singing of it the faith and commitment that Mary brought to her singing, so that like her we commit ourselves to the certainty of what shall be when we live like Christ or indeed Mary who bore him.

Powers and dominions lay their glory by- do we really want that?

Proud hearts and stubborn wills are put to flight- including our own?

The hungry fed the humble lifted high- threatening our influence or position?

We can sing this Magnificat, this song of Mary only if we sing with Mary’s conviction and faith that eventually, step by step, however long it takes, these purposes of God will be fulfilled with our engagement. Then and only then might we hope that all generations will call us, like Mary, blessed.

Hail, Mary, full of grace, blessed art thou among women and blessed is the fruit of thy womb, Jesus.

And because it is August here’s my joke for the week.

How did Mary know Jesus was 7lb 6 ozs at birth? Because there was a weigh in the manger.

BL

13.08.21