

The Magnificat: 17 August 2008: Patronal Festival.

Today is our patronal festival, so what is the point of having a patron saint? Patron saints leave us the example of their holy lives, and their relics, tangible proof of their existence, and a link with these holy people. Mary's song, the Magnificat, is both her example to us and her relic.

The Magnificat is a wonderful outpouring of praise. Mary is so delighted by the presence of God in her life and her experience of his blessings that she can't hold it in. She has to praise God "my soul magnifies the Lord, my spirit rejoices in God". It is such a wonderful song of praise, it says it all. What more can be said about it?

Earlier this year I was reading some of the great Biblical hymns with some Rabbis. It was the first time some of them had read the Magnificat, and they were quite amazed by it – how Jewish it was, and how un-Jewish it was. As we read it they found so many echoes of the Old Testament, and yet so many things that were new. It borrowed phrases from psalms and from the great songs sung by Old Testament women – by Miriam, Deborah, Hannah. Mary's song: something old, something new, something borrowed, something blue!

Praise makes us see things more clearly. If you are to praise something you must look at it as it really is. So Mary looks at God. She looks at his nature, she calls him Saviour, holy, merciful, the one who remembers and keeps his promises. She looks at his deeds: his mighty deeds of strength, laying low the proud and exalting the humble to their proper status. Mary's song is a song of doing something new, a real song of revolution.

But Mary also looks at herself as she really is, and recognises that she matters to God. She sings that God has looked with favour on her, or as we sing at Evensong, God has regarded her. In English, a matter of fact statement. But the Greek verb means to look deeply, to look closely, to look carefully, to look right into. It's the word I would use to describe a mother looking into the face of her new baby, or the lover gazing at the beloved. Mary dares to claim that look for herself. God gazes on her with that tenderness, intimacy and love. There's no "worm theology" here, no pretence that she is unworthy of God's love and regard. She claims her place before God's gaze, and challenges us to do so too. Do we know that God loves, likes us even, and looks at us with that tenderness and deep interest?

Mary looks ahead to the future: all future generations will hear her song and will come to know what God has done for her, and so will bless her and in so doing will bless God. Mary's song is for then, for now and for eternity.

All God's deeds are described in the past tense: he has regarded, helped, rescued, put down the mighty, filled the hungry, remembered his promise. And yet these are promises for the future. This is partly because the song replicates Hebrew which is a bit light on tenses, and so uses what we think of as a past tense to describe the future, but that's Hebrew's problem, not ours. But there is something deeper, more important here. These are prophetic past tenses: Mary knows that God's nature is such that she can trust in his future actions. His future deeds are as certain as if they had already happened. And so Mary claims the future as a past tense.

But this certainty, these claims. Are they not just whistling in the dark? Isn't singing such extravagant praise just escapism? Isn't it the case that she's just singing happy words to make herself feel happy. Isn't praise just a psychological boost for the one singing it?

As a priest I have promised to say morning and evening prayer every day, and so, every day I say the Magnificat. Some days I am full of joy: I have just come from a children's activity day, or a marriage prep class, and I sing the Magnificat with joy. Some days I have come from sitting with someone who is dying, or hearing the tale of someone's life which has gone so badly wrong, and I sing the Magnificat with deep pain and sorrow. But singing the Magnificat forces me to hold together two realities: the reality of joy in the Lord, and the reality of pain. Singing the Magnificat enables us to hold joy and pain together before God and ask him what he is going to do about it. There is joy and pain in our world. It's easy to be so overwhelmed by pain and sorrow, or by just the boring things of the everyday, that we lose sight of the joy that is God and knowing God. Singing the Magnificat keeps God before us.

Mary's song, the Magnificat, held together God and man, just as her son Jesus did in his incarnation. And we join with her in singing this song that holds us together with God and with all his people throughout the ages.

Mary sang a new song to the Lord, and through it she has revealed God to us. We too must sing a new song, which will reveal the glorious and loving God to those around us, so that future generations will know that God has remembered them, and will call him blessed. Amen