

The Rich He Has Sent Away

For those of us who come from what is labeled the Protestant side of the religious spectrum, the poems or songs, if you will, celebrating the birth of John and Jesus are not the most familiar parts of the Gospels. That is something of a pity. For some years our research group had a Benedictine as an active member. He worked with me closely. I noticed that, each morning, the Benedictines would read an OT psalm and a poem from the NT. Most often it would be one of these songs from the Lukan birth accounts. It is well worth pondering that daily, for well in excess of one thousand years, somewhere, someone has read this particular text as part of a devotional exercise.

Our text this morning is called the ‘Magnificat.’ The title is in honor of the first word of the poem in the Latin translation. One commentator has likened it to an aria in an opera. Mary and Elizabeth, the two expectant mothers, have just had a celebrated meeting. Mary shows respect for Elizabeth by traveling to visit her and extending warm greetings when she arrives at her house. But, in turn, Elizabeth showers Mary with more praise. She calls Mary ‘the mother of my lord.’ According to the text, the baby John leaps with joy in Elizabeth’s womb at the sound of Mary’s voice. Truly this is a momentous visit.

And so, just like the opera, the action of Luke’s story is suspended; we enjoy the aria. We relish the wonder of the scene as Mary now, seemingly ignoring Elizabeth, sings about what God will do in the coming days.

The song falls into two stanzas. Both stanzas end with praise for the mercies of God. In the first stanza (46-50) the focus is on God’s power to exalt the lowly. Mary sings:

He has regarded the lowly estate of his handmaiden. He who is
mighty has done great things for me.

In the second stanza another thought is developed. Not only has God exalted the lowly but also Mary states as accomplished fact that God has put down the proud and the mighty. This includes the rulers of the age.

But what is this? Luke has only begun his story. How can Mary speak of these things as accomplished fact? Of course it all presumes that we understand what sort of God is at work here. Mary may be speaking about the outcome of the life of her son. But it is God who is the source of the action and the central protagonist in all that takes place. He shows mercy for the poor by overthrowing the mighty.

In a way, that is the plotline of Luke-Acts. In Luke, Jewish leaders are pictured as proud and rich always seeking status. Yet in their encounters with Jesus they hardly appear to be little better than buffoons. The authorities, with all their power, put Mary’s son to death, but God raises him from the dead. All that they accomplish is that Jesus’ story is now spread abroad to the whole world. Saul persecutes the movement, but he is overruled and put on another course to fulfill God’s plan. God exalts the lowly. He puts down the proud and the mighty.

The Word To Us

So what can we, who are engaged in ministry, learn from this word. It is tempting to clothe ourselves simplistically in a way of thinking whereby we equate ourselves with the poor. Then we take delight

when the high and mighty are brought down. If we are there I suggest a different line of work – perhaps in the school of journalism.

No, what I am hearing from the text this morning is not class envy or any other type of polarization for that matter, but a quiet and confident word about the faithfulness of God to his promises.

At the very outset of our story the young woman, marginalized in the society of her time, pregnant, shelters herself under the canopy of the faithfulness of God. No matter what comes to pass, she is vindicated. She can say:

He has regarded the humble state of his servant... henceforth all generations will call me blessed. (1:49)

Mary is saying I am blessed; but it is not because of me, but because of what God will accomplish through his call of me; despite the fact that my heart will be ripped apart as my son is crucified before my eyes! I am blessed.

You may be wondering this morning what you are doing memorizing Greek paradigms or wrestling with a definition of Gnosticism? You too may feel marginalized! I tell the story of a young student who came and asked me to be his spiritual mentor! I told him I would think about it. Some time passed and I inquired about where he was. I was told he had joined George Bush's first campaign for the presidency. Later, I read, he had a low-level position in the White House.

I sometimes find myself thinking about that young man. Like all administrations, the Bush presidency is coming to an end. Fame is fleeting. What if the young man really signed on with the story we read about in Luke-Acts? Our text reminds us:

He has filled the hungry with good things and the rich he has sent away.
(Luke 1:53)

Hear this word today!

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