

Singing a revolutionary Song

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[0:00] I just wanted to say, as you're finding that, a quick word about the beginning of the passage. It starts off at that time, and at that time is immediately after the angel Gabriel has just announced to Mary that she is to be the mother of the Son of God.

That's the context. So we start to read in the section headed, Mary visits Elizabeth, verse 39, Luke chapter 1.

At that time, Mary got ready and hurried to a town in the hill country of Judea, where she entered Zechariah's home and greeted Elizabeth.

When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the baby leaped in her womb, and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. In a loud voice she exclaimed, Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the child you will bear.

But why am I so favoured that the mother of my Lord should come to me? As soon as the sound of your greeting reached my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy.

[1:23] Blessed is she who has believed that the Lord would fulfil his promises to her. And Mary said, My soul glorifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour, for he has been mindful of the humble state of his servant.

From now on, all generations will call me blessed. For the Mighty One has done great things for me. Holy is his name.

His mercy extends to those who fear him from generation to generation. He has performed mighty deeds with his arm. He has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts.

He has brought down rulers from their thrones, but has lifted up the humble. He has filled the hungry with good things, but has sent the rich away empty.

He has helped his servant Israel, remembering to be merciful to Abraham and his descendants forever, just as he promised our ancestors.

[2:38] Mary stayed with Elizabeth for about three months. And then returned home. Let's pray as we reflect on God's word.

Father God, we thank you for the gift of your word, and we pray that by your spirit you would speak to us through it now. In Jesus' name we ask this. Amen. So we're continuing our journey of the Advent story through Luke's Gospel this morning.

Last week, Tim took us through the previous section with the angel's visit to Mary, in which it was revealed to her that she will conceive through the Holy Spirit and give birth to this very special son. Now, whenever I read that story of the angel's visit to Mary, I remember when Miriam and I were learning Swahili very early on in our time in Tanzania, a couple of months in. And as an exercise, our Swahili teacher asked us to recount what we could of the Christmas story using the words that we'd learnt up to that point.

And I recounted this bit about the visit of the angel to Mary and Mary's response. And I said this, and our Swahili teacher cracked up laughing. And it turns out that what I had said, as being Mary's response to the angel, was, but how will this be, since I am a teapot?

[3:53] So it turns out that the word for virgin and the word for teapot in Swahili are very similar. One's barika, one's bakira. I got it confused. I think later on, a couple of years later, I got that confused the other way around, when we had guests for tea and I asked someone to pass the teapot.

That's what I thought I'd said. But anyway, Tim pointed out last week that Mary's question was not a question of unbelief, but it was a question of wondering how this is going to happen.

She submits to the command of the angel, but she doesn't understand it all at this point. And now we look at what Mary does next. Well, what would you do next if this happened to you?

I think it's natural for anybody when something remarkable happens to want to go and tell someone about it. But who should Mary tell? Well, actually, the angel had given her a prompt about who she should tell because he'd pointed out in verse 36, he'd pointed out to Mary that Elizabeth, her older cousin, was six months pregnant.

So Mary sets off on a journey. This brings us to verse 39. It'd be helpful if you've got that open in front of you, page 1026. So we can look at that together.

[5:00] Verse 39 says she hurried to the hill country. You can see on the map there the journey she took across the other side of the country. Not an easy journey. But she went straight away. So this would have been before she had any kind of bump or outward signs to show that she's pregnant.

And I wonder, you know, it's a long journey. Her mind would have been turning over these events. What would have been going through her mind as she took that journey? Well, I think she would have thought, well, what if nobody believes me?

As a Jewish girl living among humble conservative Jews, she would have known that had her story been invented, it wouldn't have had the slightest hope of being believed by anybody.

Now we know from Matthew's gospel what Joseph thought when he first heard the story. He and all of his social class would have regarded Mary as guilty of a criminal breach of the law of betrothal, which was almost the same as marriage, for which the Old Testament law actually prescribed the death penalty, although it was not usually carried out at this time.

But she, at the same time, she remembered so clearly what the angel had said. She'd been chosen for this gigantic, unprecedented task. But I'll guess that there would have been some cause for her to doubt as she thought it all through or on the way to Elizabeth's house.

[6:17] Had she imagined it, after all? Was she actually going crazy? Had she dreamt all this up? She reaches Elizabeth's house in verse 40 and greets her. And what happens is another remarkable moment.

Verse 41. When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the baby leaped in her womb and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. Now remember that Luke, who wrote this, was a medically trained person. So we have this detail of what was happening in Mary's womb, the baby leaping inside her. Now clearly Elizabeth is aware of the fact that what's happened to her is no ordinary case of the baby just getting restless inside her, but something special is happening.

Now if we look back at verse 15 and 16 of this chapter, we remember that the message from the angel to Zechariah about his child was that he would turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God and that this would happen because he would be filled with the Holy Spirit even from before his birth.

So there's a prophecy there that he would be filled with the Holy Spirit even in his mother's womb. This is what the angel had told to Zechariah, Elizabeth's husband. And I'm guessing that Zechariah shared all that with Elizabeth.

[7:28] Though come to think about it, I'm not sure how he told her because he wasn't able to speak at this point. I'd quite like to imagine he did this using charades, which would have been quite interesting to see. But then I remembered actually having looked later on.

He has a writing tablet which he uses later to communicate things to Elizabeth. So he probably wrote it down, which is probably easier. But at this moment that Mary turns up, Elizabeth feels her baby leaping for joy inside her womb and she herself is filled with the Holy Spirit.

Now keep in mind that these events are taking place after a long period of hundreds of years of silence in terms of anybody hearing the prophetic word of God.

And the prevailing atmosphere in the society seems like impenetrable darkness. But what's happening is that prophecies like the one back in Ezekiel chapter 39 about God pouring his spirit on the house of Israel are now being fulfilled.

But they're being fulfilled in a place that no one would ever expect, with people that no one would ever expect. And we need to keep in mind today that God is still at work when the silence seems

deafening and the darkness seems impenetrable.

[8:43] Elizabeth, remember, she hadn't had a WhatsApp message with a picture of Mary's ultrasound scan or news of what's been happening in Mary's life. She had no knowledge of this. Mary has just shown up.

She's literally just come in and said hello. She hasn't explained anything yet. But look what happens next. Elizabeth invited Mary in for a coffee. No, that's not what happened. It says, she exclaimed with a loud voice, verse 42, blessed are you among women and blessed is the child you will bear. Now, for those of you who've ever had the experience of discovering that you're pregnant, do you remember how people reacted when you first told them your news? For us in Tanzania, it was a very joyful moment when we had the news that we were expecting our first child, especially after a long period of trying to conceive.

And one of the first people that Miriam, my wife, told was one of our close Tanzanian friends, a lady called Mama Kiri, who was like a surrogate auntie to us, lived down the road. And Miriam went to see her and tell her the news.

And Mama Kiri was eating at the time, eating her dinner. And when Miriam told her the news, she put her plate down, she put her hands up in the air and said, I'm so full, I can't eat anymore because I'm full of joy.

[9:51] It was a wonderful moment. And Elizabeth here is full of joy. She tells Mary how blessed she is and how blessed her child is. This is without hearing anything from Mary.

This is what's been revealed to her by the Holy Spirit. And in verse 43, Elizabeth says, Why am I so favoured that you should come to me? And culturally, Mary had no credentials to deserve any honour, especially from a woman who was much older than she was.

She was younger. She was likely a teenager. She was poor. We know from Luke 2.24 that she and Joseph gave pigeons as a sacrifice in Jerusalem. That was the category of sacrifice stipulated for poor people.

Not to mention, as an unmarried mother, Mary had a negative status in her society. She would have been an outcast to many. But Elizabeth honours Mary because of the honour that God has given her.

Elizabeth's own baby, John, is the one who's going to go before the Messiah. That again was the prophecy from verse 17 that Malcolm spoke on a couple of weeks ago. In verse 44, The baby in her womb, sensing the presence of his master in the womb of his auntie, leaps in anticipation.

[11:03] It's as if he knows that he is the one who will be going before, that he is the one who must come out first in order that he might be ahead of the one who will come after him, the one who is greater than he is.

It's interesting that Elizabeth refers to the baby in Mary's womb as Lord in verse 43 and the one who has fulfilled his promises to Mary as Lord in verse 45.

So which is it? Is the Lord the one who has sent or is the Lord the baby in her tummy? Well, the answer is yes to both. Actually, Elizabeth's song is very profound in its Trinitarian theology.

We could spend a lot more time pondering on that, but we'll move on. Hearing Elizabeth's words for Mary, this reinforces everything that the angel had told her. Before she gets a chance to tell Elizabeth, Elizabeth has told her.

And if Mary imagined, even for a moment, that perhaps she'd got it wrong, her faith is now secured. It's strengthened by the response of her relative. This is a penny-dropping moment for Mary.

[12:08] Up until now, she's responded faithfully, but it's been a kind of semi-comprehending submission. But now she has real clarity of what is going on.

And she proceeds with this amazing song, her amazing song, the first ever Christmas carol in many senses. But before we get on to her song, I want to just reflect briefly on what helped Mary to get to this place of having this amazingly clear divine revelation.

You know, I think what was really important for Mary, what's really important for any of us, was sharing her spiritual experience with somebody else. We've just finished an Alpha course over the last few weeks, and several of our participants have said how helpful they found it to be with other people, sharing experiences, and hearing from each other as we've explored the Christian faith together.

We find the Lord in community when we're with other people. God's word was revealed to Mary when she met up with Elizabeth. Now I have to say that women are generally much better at this than us men.

Us men sometimes need a bit of encouragement to pick up the phone to get in touch with our mates, to arrange to meet up with them, to talk about things which are really important. But we need this. Mary had a calling, probably the most amazing calling that anyone could have, but the calling was confirmed by somebody else.

[13:31] We need community to confirm our calling. If you think that God is calling you, one of the best things you can do is to be quiet, keep praying, keep serving, and wait for somebody to confirm that calling.

So now we come on to Mary's response in verse 46. This is very famous, it's known as the Magnificat, from the Latin word for magnify, as in glorify the Lord. In many churches this would be read regularly as part of the liturgy.

And it says in verse 46 that Mary said, the heading in the NIV is Mary's song. It certainly reads like a song in its poetic form.

And one of the surprising things is how Mary, from her humble, lowly background we've described, could come out with all these amazing words. It makes me think a little bit of musical films where the characters are interactive and the narrative is flowing like an ordinary film and then one of them just bursts out in song and it kind of seems a bit strange.

But songs in musical films and in theatre productions express emotion in a way that can't be conveyed just by regular dialogue. And for Mary this is an expression of not just her emotion but of this spiritual experience of what the Holy Spirit is doing in her heart.

[14:48] So it's natural that it should be poetic and beautiful. And the language that she uses is biblical language. It's steeped in Old Testament phrases which she would have grown up hearing. You know, the words of Scripture are God's communication to us but they also provide us with vocabulary for expressing the contents of our heart to God.

So verse 46, Mary said, My soul glorifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour. Her song follows the pattern of many psalms.

She begins by thanking God and then she says why she's thankful. This is a song of rejoicing from her soul and from her heart. It's from the core centre of herself.

She's not rejoicing that she's discovered a code of ethics, a moral framework. She's been touched by the presence of God himself. She worships God as her Saviour in verse 47.

Mary needs a Saviour just like everybody else. She's not perfect. Perfect people do not need a Saviour. In verse 48, there's a four. Here she gives the reason for her praise.

[15:54] For he has been mindful of the humble state of his servant. From now on all generations will call me blessed. God has noticed her, a nobody, and he wants to use her as part of his amazing plan.

And all generations will call her blessed. I think as Protestant Christians we need to recognise this because we often throw out the baby with the bathwater in trying to avoid an unbiblical theology of Mary.

Now I've already mentioned two things that Mary isn't. She isn't a Saviour and she isn't perfect. The trouble is that as Protestants our theological view of Mary can end up just being a list of things that we don't believe about Mary.

But we have plenty of things we do believe about Mary and that we have reasons to call her blessed. Tim mentioned one last week when he talks about the link back to Eve and the promise in Genesis made to the serpent.

That Mary says all generations shall call me blessed. She doesn't add because I'm to be the mother of the son of God. Now it's interesting to note that in fact she doesn't mention being the mother of the son of God anywhere in this song.

[17:01] But rather she says because the mighty one has done great things for me. In other words what God has done rather than what she is is the reason that she is blessed. Verse 49 she continues with her reasons for the mighty one has done great things for me holy is his name.

Now so far Mary has made three statements about herself in relation to God. It's my my and me but from this point on it's he he and he everything else she says is about God.

She says a little bit about herself to begin with and when she does talk about herself it's about herself praising God or her lowly status or what God has done for her. but the rest of the song is all about God.

His name is sacred and holy. Verse 50 his mercy extends to those who fear him from generation to generation. When the Bible talks about fear of God it's not fear in the sense of being scared of something it means a reverent humble obedience that seeks to please God.

He is mighty as she said in verse 49 but also merciful. You see God brings down people in order to raise them up with new life. The mighty God is the merciful God.

[18:17] Verse 51 he has performed mighty deeds with his arm. His arm this is using the language of Exodus describing a God who is personally engaged to save his people.

He has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts. He has brought down the rulers from their thrones verse 52 but has lifted up the humble. He has filled the hungry with good things but has sent the rich away empty.

If you ever go sailing you know that you need wind in order to sail a boat but wind can do one of two things in a sailing boat. It can either take you to your destination or it can dash you against the rocks depending how you meet the wind with your sails.

God has come with grace but what happens to you depends how you meet that grace. If you meet it with humility you'll have mercy.

If you meet it with pride you'll be judged. The gospel doesn't say that the good come and the bad don't. Those that know they're bad come and those that think they're good can't come.

[19:25] Mary sings that if you're scattered you'll be gathered. If you're all in pieces he will put you back together. If you say I'm all together he will scatter you. But if you're humble he will give you a confidence.

There's a psychological revolution here. The humble will be lifted the proud will be scattered. And then there's a sociological revolution. He brings down rulers but lifts up the poor.

He fills the hungry in verse 53 but sends the rich away with nothing. Now in verse 54 she speaks about what her son's birth means for believing Israelites.

He has helped his servant Israel remembering to be merciful to Abraham and his descendants forever just as he promised our ancestors. During her childhood in the home in the synagogue at the religious festivals Mary would have heard hundreds of times of God's calling of Abraham of the formation of her nation from him of God's great covenant to him and to his seed.

So when this incredible event happened to her she had its biblical context already imprinted on her mind. The promise to Abraham that God would bless the whole world through his offering was made 42 generations back 2,000 years ago.

[20:41] A promise 2,000 years old was fulfilled at this moment. Jesus promised 2,000 years ago that he's coming back so we have no reason to doubt that promise.

As we finish what can we take from this? How can we relate to Mary who has such a unique experience? She was blessed in a very special way to be the earthly mother of the son of God. That blessing is totally unique. God gave his son to be formed in her body. She is the God bearer. That's totally unique. And yet actually what God is doing in the life of you if you're a Christian is forming his son in you.

Conforming you to the image of his son. That same spirit of God that conceived new life in Mary and put this wonderful song in her heart is the same spirit that works in the life of any person to bring them to conversion and to change them into the likeness of his son.

That's what God is doing in your life if you trust him and let him in. He's forming his son in you. That's how God's spirit works. He doesn't bring us to a point where we say, oh it makes perfect sense, God must know what a wonderful person I am, I've done this and I've done that and I've achieved all this so I am blessed.

[22:02] No. The spirit of God shows you that you're a bigger mess than you're prepared to accept even from the mouth of anyone who knows you really well. That you're more broken, you're more messed up, you're more sinful than you could ever, ever imagine.

And then the spirit of God says, well I've got amazing news for you. This Jesus that is born of Mary is the one who saves you from the mess of your life, from the mess of your sin.

So when you've tried your best to fix yourself, when you've tried your best to free yourself, when you've tried your best to make sense of yourself and realise that you can't, the spirit of God is at work saying, God lifts up the humble, he fills the hungry with good things, he doesn't treat you as you deserve because he is merciful.

And you are blessed because of God's mercy in Jesus. Because in Jesus God has stepped down into our world which is broken, he's stepped down into our human sin and our messed up lives and our failures, he's come because no one else could, he's the only one that can save us.

The question for each of us is, can I take Mary's statement and speak those words and use them as a genuine expression of my understanding of God's grace and goodness to me?

[23:22] In other words, am I able to say, my spirit rejoices in God, my saviour? You can decide right now, not be good and God will bless you, but instead admit that like Mary, you're at the bottom.

He will lift you up. He sent Jesus for you because he loves you. He's the one. That's the message of Christmas. Let's just take a moment to pray, to reflect, a moment of quiet first of all, just to reflect, to listen to God as he speaks to us through his spirit, to hear what he's saying to us in this moment through his word.

Let's just spend a moment in quiet. Lord, we thank you for your Holy Spirit who spoke your words onto the pages of our Bible.

Thank you for your Holy Spirit who creates new life, who uniquely breathed new life of your son into the womb of Mary. thank you for your Holy Spirit who put a new song into the heart of Mary, that she was full of joy and wonder and praise of you.

We live in a time and a place that seems so full of darkness and for many of us we long to hear from you but it seems that all we hear is deafening silence. Lord, by your Spirit would you put a new song in our hearts.

[25:18] Lord, fill us with your joy, fill us with your peace, fill us with a song of praise to you. We acknowledge, we recognise that so often the song that we sing is me, me, me.

Transform our hearts, Lord, lift our hearts to you so that we would sing of you, that our lives and our actions would sing of you and you and more of you. Fill us with your praises so that we can sing. My soul glorifies you and my spirit rejoices in you, my saviour. In Jesus' name, amen.