

The change that only God can bring

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 16 December 2018

Preacher: Daniel Ralph

[0 : 00] I'm going to turn your attention briefly, if I can, to a couple of verses very well known by all of us in Luke, the beginning of Mary's Magnificat.

Next week, as we go through the carol service, the readings are going to all be from Matthew, from the younger men in the church, the young boys, and they will be coming up and taking us through the Gospel of Matthew, at least the birth narrative. But here in Luke chapter 1, I'd like to draw your attention, if I can, just really briefly. And as we read this, I want you to think about it in this terms, or in this way. The change that only God can bring.

The change that only God can bring. I think that's probably an important way of looking at it, this. Here are the words, verse 46 through to the end of verse 48. Now hear God's word.

It's a simple enough reading, isn't it? But the meaning is sort of deep and wide, and it's got a real treasure to it. And I just, I guess what I want to do this evening is be able to explain that treasure to you, to be able to at least show it to you. And I think the best way to do it is to think about it in terms is the change that only God can bring. You know, we're getting to that time of year where some people decide to turn over a new leaf. How long does that change, the decided change actually last for? Starting a new diet, gym membership, many other things that might bring or hopefully bring change. But none of those things really ever bring change the way that God brings change. Mary here is incredibly thankful to God. And I think one of the first things that you recognize when a person becomes a Christian is that two things come out of their mouth. Number one, thanks. Number two, a reason to be thankful. You're sat here this evening. You belong to God.

[2 : 45] Do you give him thanks? I'm sure you do. But you also know why you thank him. And those reasons that you have come down to the change that only God can create in a person. Mary says something incredibly insightful, yet it seems that she is saying something to draw attention to herself. But in fact, she's doing the very opposite. She says in verse 48, for behold, from now on, all generations will call me blessed. It seems strange that she begins by saying, my soul will magnify the Lord.

And then in part of her testimony, she says, no, no, from now on, all generations will call me blessed. Why is that praising God? Well, it's praising God for a number of reasons, and we're only going to concentrate on two. And we're going to concentrate on the two that allows us to understand the change that only God can bring. I want to assure you this evening that any long-lasting, meaningful change change in your life is only going to be done in your life by God, Christian or not. Well, you'll become a Christian if you give it over to God. But it must continue in that vein. Any meaningful change in your life tomorrow or the next day or next year has to come from God. That's a reason to be thankful.

Mary's in a sort of a very unique position. She has been approached by an angel. She's been approached by God through an angel, saying that she will be the one to bring the Savior into the world.

And she says before God, let this be done according to your will. In other words, she finds it strange to be able to understand exactly how this will happen. And yet the angel explains it to her very briefly, very simply. Mary appreciates what the angel has said to her, but her spirit is simply, Lord, your will be done.

Do you know, many of us have expectations at Christmas. Do you know, and I'm sure Mary had her own. And yet what Mary does is she reverses expectations. That when you're dealing with God, or shall I say that God is dealing with you, there does become a reversal in expectations. That what I want does come second to what God wants for me. That what I want to do does come second to what God wants me to do.

[5 : 23] That what I would like comes second to what God would like me to have. In other words, Mary understands that a privileged position is not to have everything her own way. But rather, she says, let it be done to me according to your will, not according to the way I want it to happen. Don't allow my life to pan out the way I want it to pan out, but let it be done to me according to your will. And out of this, she is incredibly thankful to God that God is doing this very thing. And she gives reasons for being thankful that the Savior, Jesus Christ, will be one who saves her. Even though she brings him into this world, she proclaims that my God, my soul magnifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God, my Savior.

In other words, she knows that it's deeply personal. And I think that you know when God begins to change you because he gets personal. And anybody who's in a relationship will know that if it's a good relationship, it gets personal at times. Right? Sometimes it can be a little bit uncomfortable. Other times it can be incredibly loving. Sometimes it can be guiding. Sometimes it can be confrontational. But anybody knows if they're in any kind of meaningful relationship at all that is committed to one another, that it is deeply personal. Not just personal at the decisions level, but it's deeply personal at the heart and the mind and the will. Everything gets affected when you're in relationship.

Well, Mary is in no other situation with God. She is deeply affected by the will of God concerning her life. But she's in a privileged position, yet she also understands her need for a Savior. She understands that though this is happening through her, yet nevertheless she needs the meaningful change that only Christ can bring. My soul rejoices in God, my Savior. She understands that she's not exempt from anybody else that Christ has come for, but she is actually included in the change that Christ will bring, or she will be one whom will be changed by the coming of Christ. There's two ways, I think, to look at this. The first is, of course, attention. You know, Advent is about our attention being drawn to God, but particularly to what God does by giving us Jesus Christ. That our attention is drawn to the reasons why Jesus was sent. That our attention focuses on the fact that God gave his Son, out of his family, if we can put it that way, the triune God of Scripture, to bring us into his family. He sends us into, he sends Christ into a family in the world, or the beginning of one, and then to bring the families of the world into his very own. In other words, it's this beautiful picture of the family of God, the triune God of Scripture, wanting to share that communion with those on earth. And that type of change is the only change that God can bring. And the way God brings it is by giving his Son into the world. Everything changes.

[8 : 52] It's the hinge point in the whole of history. Jesus Christ coming into the world. It is the point at which everything changes. I want you to think about it this way. Imagine tomorrow if the government got themselves together. Okay. Down in England, that is. I'll just put those English ones down there.

Imagine they got themselves together. And they decided to pass a law that gravity no longer existed. Okay. And somebody feels the liberty of that new law. And they decide to go off and jump off a building.

They may feel incredibly free. And they will be completely consistent with the law of the land. But at some point, reality hits home. I guess the point that I'm making is this, that it doesn't really matter what you commit to. What really matters is what's true. It doesn't really matter what law you live your life by. No, no, no. What really matters is what laws are actually in operation.

You know, this is why we sung that song that Jesus reigns forever. It doesn't matter whether or not you live your life according to that. What matters is whether or not it's true. Well, Mary understands that when she says, let it be done to me according to your will, that she understands that this is the gravity moment. This is the thing that changes everything. This is the thing that will shape everything. God draws us to him in Christ in the same way gravity does when we jump off the curb or if we jump off something higher. Christ has that power to draw men and women, boys and girls to himself. In other words, he is the law. It's the law of God, but it's the law of love. It's a law that came down from heaven above to take us there. Mary understands all of this. My soul rejoices in that, she says. My soul rejoices in God, my Savior. So what Mary understands, Lord, let it be done to me according to your will, is she understands that

I may want to live? Well, she doesn't say that, but others might say I may want to live according to a different law of the land. Mary says it doesn't matter. It doesn't matter. Gravity exists.

[11 : 22] It doesn't matter if the law of the land says there is no gravity. It'll affect everyone. It'll have power over everyone. Christ has entered into the world and he is the gravity of God. It affects everything.

That's the meaningful change that God brings. But instead of pulling us down like gravity, he pulls us up out of the mire, out of the troubles, out of the struggle, out of anything that we are in, into his presence. That's the gravity of God. It is a pulling up out of into his presence.

And that is the only change, the meaningful change, that will last forever. And that is found in Christ Jesus. But then Mary says this, and this is found in her humility. She says, for behold, from now on, all generations will call me blessed. That doesn't sound very humble, does it? You know, from now on, all generations will call me blessed. It doesn't sound like she's drawing attention to God. It actually sounds like she's drawing attention to herself. But actually, it's the very opposite which is true. When Mary says that from now on, all generations will call me blessed, it is a big attention draw to God. It may not look like it. In the same way that we praise the girls for singing, in the same way we praise the praise group for singing with the girls. Okay, it sounds like we're praising them. Maybe we are a little bit, but notice what's happening as we praise them.

When Mary says, every generation from now on will call me blessed, she's not drawing attention to herself. Rather, she's drawing attention to the God who made her that way.

In other words, Mary understands in her humility, she's nothing special in the eyes of the world. She's just a young girl that nobody pays any attention to. Okay, she's betrothed, she's about to get married, of course, but by and large, you'd walk past her on the street and not even think that that was someone special. Mary isn't special because she's Mary, but Mary is special because she belongs to God. In other words, what makes Mary special is not Mary. What makes Mary special is God.

[13 : 51] In other words, you're blessed in the same way. Don't ever forget that. Don't ever forget that in the same way Mary can say this, generations can look at you and call you blessed, not in the same way as Mary. But you're blessed because God blesses you. In other words, God is the one who creates the meaningful change, the only one. I'm going to try and, if I can, briefly illustrate this in a couple of ways. Here's the first way. God doesn't compete with you. And God never wants to compete with any man, woman, boy and girl. And often when we think of competition as a good thing, then we normally always think of competition as first and second place, third place. In other words, we think of a top five, but we never remember who was sixth. We may think of a top 10, but we never remember who was 11th. And so when we think of competition, we think of the person in front trying to get as much of a, as far ahead as possible as the person who's in second place. God doesn't compete with you in that way. God is not exercising his will in competition with you exercising your own. God isn't trying to have his own way and exerts his tremendous power over you so that he can have it so that you cannot have your own. That's not what God does. God is not in competition with the people he created. One, there is no competition, because if God was in competitive fashion in that way, we wouldn't win. But rather he's not. He doesn't compete with human beings, with the people he created. Rather he brings them to their full potential. In other words, Mary on her own is just

Mary. But Mary in the hands of God is used for the purposes of God. So when she says, let it be done to me according to your will, that's not a weakness. Rather that is a supreme submission. It's an act of humility, recognizing that the real change which only God can bring is happening to me. And it's happening to me in my very life at this very moment. God comes first. Of course he comes first. But he doesn't come first like a runner in a race, hoping that you come second. God doesn't come first in that way. God comes first in priority ways, but he comes first in a way that completes us.

Not to get ahead of us, but to bring us to him. Okay, so when we think about God being first in our life, it's not a competitive God. It's simply a God who deserves that pride of place, that priority, that pinnacle, to be at the top, to be the center of attention. But here's the second way.

Mary says, from now on all generations will call me blessed. Do you know what? I quite like drawing and not very good. I absolutely love paintings, but I can't afford the ones that I like.

[17 : 09] I have one on my wall in the manse. It's a print, not the real one, unfortunately. It has been stolen from the museum eight times. And the painting is Edvard Munch's The Scream. He actually painted four of them the same. They're all slightly different. I have one of the four. It's a beautiful painting, painting, but no one's ever seen it when they walk into the house. You know

why? Because I'm the only one who likes it. And my wife has made sure that it's hung on the wall where the door is always kept open and it's there behind the door. So every now and then when everyone else is in bed, I go into the room and I turn the light on and I sit in the chair and I look at the painting. Just amazing.

And I praise the painting and I think this is a beautiful painting. It's amazing in a number of different ways. If Edvard Munch was still alive, do you think he would be pleased with what I'm saying about his painting? If you had painted a painting and someone came along and said that your picture was absolutely beautiful, that your drawing was incredible, it was wonderful in every way, that you put every color where you decided to place it, every object in that frame where you wanted it, and you were pleased with what you had created, and someone comes along and praises that painting, how would you feel?

Well, you would immediately recognize that you are being praised because that's your work. So when Mary says here, from now on, every generation will call me blessed, what she says, she says, I'm the painting, but God's the painter. Okay, I'm the masterpiece, but God's the master. She's not drawing attention to herself, rather she's drawing attention to God because God is the only one who can complete her in that way. God is the only one who can bring the very best out of a person, the only one who can make us fully colored, truly beautiful, so that when people look and when people see and they give praise, just like we give the girls this evening, it's going straight to God. Why? Because only God could do that. Only God can bring that out. So hear the words of Mary, from now on, every generation will call me blessed. She's not drawing attention to herself. She's drawing attention to God. She knows that she's the painting, that she's the drawing, and that when people look at her, they will see the very greatness of God. I guess the encouragement or perhaps even the challenge to you this evening is, where are you?

You know, you're a painting before God. You're his creation. I guess what I'm trying to say is that, you know, without Christ, you're an unfinished painting. You know, without Christ, you know, perhaps all the structure and the lines are there, but you've just not yet been colored in. You know, and God doesn't paint by numbers. I paint by numbers. Painting by numbers is incredibly difficult, especially when you can't count. God doesn't do that. God is incredibly masterful.

Well, here's the exhortation then as we close. You know, people who live in this world feeling like their life is not complete, I guess it's the equivalent of a painting that's not finished, or a sculpture that's unfinished. You know, people who live their lives in this world and feel that they're just not complete, that they know that there's more to them than what they see, that they know that there's more to them than what they feel, and yet they can't figure out how to complete themselves. And the answer is very, very simple. You can't.

[21 : 17] You can't. You are the creation of God. And only God is able to finish his own work. And I guess your life, if I can put it this way, was beautiful at the beginning, back in the Garden of Eden, but it got ruined by everything that ruins life now. There's a lot of stuff that ruins life now. There's a lot of stuff that ruins relationship. God is able to take the painting and make it good again. God is able to take the sculpture and clean the stains. God is able to reverse. God is able to undo. I said this to you a couple of years ago. There's a man down in Westerhales, and he said to me, I don't need God to do anything for me. Do you know, I've heard that a lot. So I said to him, a moment of inspiration, I don't know what it was, but I just happened to say to him, well, is there anything that God can undo for you? Well, suddenly then he had something.

You see, we all live in a world where we may not think we need God to do anything for us, but I can guarantee that every one of us sat here this evening may feel like the unfinished painting. We may feel like there's so much more to us, but actually we all recognize that while we can't figure out what that is, there's plenty of stuff that we would like undone. Well, that's what God does.

God completes us by reversing, by restoring, by bringing us back to the glory that we were created in. From now on, Mary says, every generation will call me blessed. She's not praising herself. She's not even drawing attention to herself. Rather, she's rightly giving all the praise to God. Why? Because only God can create the meaningful change in her life that makes her that way. Only God can do something like that. Now, here's the final thought.

It takes God to complete a person. It takes God to complete a person. And the Christian life, a life that acknowledges in humility, Lord, let it be done to me according to your will, is like an actor who longs for the red carpet. But up until that point, they have to play their role.

[23 : 50] Up until that point, they have to fulfill the role that they have been given. But one day, the red carpet is going to be rolled out for you. And it's called glory.

One day, you will be seen in your beautiful dress, in your tuxedo. One day, you will be seen as you really are. But that day will only come when Christ comes in his glory. Because as John says, or one John says rather, that we will become like him when we see him as he is. What John is saying is this, that people become complete only when they come to Christ. And even when you have come to Christ, you only get that full completion, that standing out on the red carpet of God when Christ returns and you see him as he is. So here's the challenge which I'll finish with. Mary knows that life with God begins with humility. But it's also deeply personal. God must make the change. Because only God can make the change. Mary's challenge to all of us is this. You want to belong to God? Then God's going to have to get personal. You want to enjoy the blessings of God? Yes, of course. Okay. Then God is going to have to get personal. And then the change will begin. Amen.