

“Like Mary, giving flesh...” Advent 4, Cathedral

Last Sunday we sang a fiesty, Irish-American magnificat, or Song of Mary paraphrased by Catholic writer Rory Cooney and set to the tune “Star of the County Down”. Checking him out on Facebook I find I warmed to him immediately, because he confessed thus: *OK. So. I just tried to open the microphone cupboard in church by pressing the “unlock” button on my car key. This is so me.*

But anyway, a bunch of you gave the refrain a decent go as we sang:

“My heart shall sing of the day you bring, let the fire of your justice burn. Wipe away all tears for the dawn draws near, and the world is about to turn.”

In some exquisite choral setting it is easy to simply hear these words as familiar and comforting.

This morning I want to share the observations of another American, blogger and author Rachel Held Evans, who, having emerged from fundamentalism is now an Anglican (or Episcopalian, as they and the Scots have it). Her memoir “A year of Biblical womanhood” is a hilarious foray into her unsuccessful efforts to fulfil Scriptural norms for women. Here's what she has to say about the Magnificat:

...I’m not feeling sentimental this Advent. I’m feeling angry, restless.

And so in this season, I hear Mary’s Magnificat shouted, not sung:

In the halls of the Capitol Building....

"He has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty."

In the corridors of the West Wing...

“He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly.”

In the streets of Charlottesville...

“He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.”

Among women who have survived assault, harassment, and rape...

“He has looked with favour on the lowliness of his servant. Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed.”

Among the poor, the refugees, the victims of gun violence, and the faithful ministers of the gospel who at great cost are speaking out against the false religions of nationalism and white supremacy...

“His mercy is for those who fear him, from generation to generation.”

With the Magnificat, Mary not only announces a birth, she announces the inauguration of a new kingdom, one that stands in stark contrast to every other kingdom—past, present, and future—that relies on violence and exploitation to achieve “greatness.”

With the Magnificat, Mary declares that God has indeed chosen sides.

And it’s not with the powerful, but the humble.

It’s not with the rich, but with the poor.

It’s not with the occupying force, but with people on the margins.

It’s not with narcissistic kings, but with an un-wed, un-believed teenage girl entrusted with the holy task of birthing, nursing, and nurturing God.

This is the stunning claim of the incarnation: God has made a home among the very people the world casts aside. And in her defiant prayer, Mary—a dark-skinned woman, a refugee, a religious minority in an occupied land—names this reality.

“God is with us. And if God is with us, who can stand against us?”

The season of Advent is meant to be a time of waiting.

In years past, I lit candles, sang “O Come Emmanuel,” and pondered in stillness the joy of Christ’s first coming and the hope of his second.

But this year I cannot be still. This year, hope is hard, belief is hard.

And so I'm waiting with the angst of the prophets, with the restlessness of the psalmist who cried "How long, oh Lord, will You hide your face forever?" and with the stubborn, unsentimental hope of a woman so convinced the baby inside her would change everything, she proclaimed in present tense that the great reversal has already arrived—

The powerful have already been humbled.

The vulnerable have already been lifted up.

For God has made a home among the people.

God has made a home with us.

And another writer I quoted recently says succinctly:

We're called to bring the Good News of liberation to the prisoners, of food for the hungry, of the dignity of those considered lowly by the powers of this world. We're called to do that not just in words or song, but like Mary, giving flesh to God's hope, God's peace, God's justice, and God's love for the world.*

There it is. It's not so much about recalling the first Christmas, as important as that may be, but it's listening to the message of the Angel for each of us:

You and I are called to give flesh to God's hope, God's peace, God's justice, and God's love for the world. And that can only happen when we choose to make room in our lives for God to grow in us.

But are you thinking *Well that's all very American isn't it. Nothing much to do with us down here in Godzone.*

The other half of this sermon will follow tomorrow morning – and it will begin with consideration of the meaning of flying the confederate flag. No, not the one over there in the U S of A. I mean the one that's just started flying at the end of our road. Seriously.

Ian Render

*Sarah Dylan Breure