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# The FURROW

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## The Magnificat: The Church's Most Sung Canticle of Praise (Luke 1:46-55)

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## MARY SETS OUT ON A PROPHETIC JOURNEY

Luke portrays Mary as going “with haste” on a prophetic journey “into the hill country” to visit her cousin Elizabeth (Lk 1:39). Her hurried journey evoked for St. Ambrose the glad tidings depicted by Isaiah’s words, “How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of the messenger who announces peace, who brings good news, who announces salvation” (Is 52:7).<sup>1</sup> Luke tells us about the meeting of two women who share the grace of being pregnant with children who will have special missions in God’s plan of salvation. It is the only scene in the entire gospel where two women meet and hold center stage.<sup>2</sup> Zechariah’s silence contrasts with the glorious spirit-inspired speech of both women.<sup>3</sup> Mary’s haste and Elizabeth’s loud cry of praise show the exuberant joy of these two expectant mothers. The tradition of Luke’s community recalled the meeting of these two women who had heard the word of God and continued to ponder and live it. Inspired by the Spirit, Elizabeth prophetically announces that “the mother of my Lord” (Lk 1:43) has come to visit her. She blesses Mary:

“Blessed are you among women” (v.42), words that echo the praise addressed to other women famous in Israelite history who have helped to deliver God’s people from peril. When Jael dispatches an enemy of the people the prophet Deborah prays, “Most blessed be Jael among women,” and Uzziah praises Judith after her spectacular defeat of the enemy general, “O daughter, you are blessed by the Most High above all other women on the earth” (Jdt 13:18).<sup>4</sup>

1 Elizabeth Johnson: *Truly Our Sister: A Theology of Mary in the Communion of Saints* (New York: Continuum, 2003), p. 259.

2 Donald Senior, “Gospel Portrait of Mary,” in *Mary, Woman of Nazareth, Biblical and Theological Perspectives*, (New York: Paulist Press, 1989), p. 104.

3 Gaventa, *Mary: Glimpses of the Mother of Jesus* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 1995), p. 55.

4 Johnson, p. 105.

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Both Mary and Elizabeth must have been conscious of the part they were playing in the history of salvation: Mary preparing to give birth to the Messiah, Elizabeth preparing to give birth to the prophet who would prepare the way for the same Messiah. They carry in their bodies the compassion of God which they prophetically proclaim and in doing so highlight women's ability to interpret God's word for other women.

## THE PROPHETIC MESSAGE OF THE MAGNIFICAT

As Mary and Elizabeth grew together in intimacy with their God and in inexhaustible compassion for their people, they praised God for the awesome accomplishments that enabled them to mother the next generation of prophets: John the precursor and Jesus the savior of the world. They can hardly contain their joy, their voices resounding, one praising the other and both praising God.<sup>5</sup> Luke found it fitting to attribute the *Magnificat* to Mary because she provided a compelling model of discipleship for his community. In this canticle of praise he offers us the good news that escaped Mary's lips in poetry and prophecy. It is the longest passage put on the lips of any female speaker in the New Testament. This canticle which "joyfully proclaims God's gracious, effective compassion at the advent of the messianic age" also reads like a protest against "the scriptural silencing of 'the lowly,' and the suppression of women's voices."<sup>6</sup> Her praise of God's victorious deeds for the oppressed community is modelled on Old Testament songs of divine praise and describes the inversion of earthly circumstances in which one recognizes God's action and bursts forth in song like her earlier sister prophets: Miriam (Ex 15; 20-21), Deborah (Jgs 5:1-31), Hannah (1Sm 2:1-10), and Judith (Jdt 16:1-17).

When Luke wants to offer the poor, the sick, the widows and the oppressed of his community a message of hope, he chooses the song of Hannah in 1 Sm 2:1-10. Hannah, whose natural distress at being childless is intensified by the provocation of Peninah, Elkanah's other wife who has had several sons and daughters and who ridiculed Hannah for being childless. At the birth of Samuel Hannah celebrates the occasion and at a heightened moment of prayer Mary would have made her own the sentiments and concerns of Hannah and sang of these in grateful song.

In their radical, subversive conversation and prayer both Mary and Elizabeth were politically astute and socially sensitive, expressing their hopes of changing the unjust structures of their society. The poor/humble/lowly "is a clear reference to the people

5 Ibid. pp. 258-259..

6 Ibid., pp. 263-264.

of Israel, usually in conditions of domination, oppression, and affliction.”<sup>7</sup> Speaking her *Magnificat* offers a definite agenda of what has to change: the world must be turned upside down. This could only be achieved by putting down the powerful, raising up the lowly, the poor and the marginalized of the world, and filling the hungry with good things (Lk 1:52-53). While the *Magnificat* is profoundly religious it is also political. Mary’s visit to Elizabeth culminates in the manifesto for social change. Both women are concerned about the future of their nation and their Galilean villagers who often had to borrow money to pay the triple tax, many falling into increasing indebtedness to the powerful and rich. During the Roman occupation Galileans had to pay the traditional tithe for the Temple in Jerusalem, a second tax as a tribute to the Roman emperor and a third to the local Jewish client-king by whom Rome ruled by proxy.<sup>8</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer places the *Magnificat* among the revolutionary songs of the women prophets of the Old Testament:

It is at once the most passionate, the wildest, one might say the most revolutionary Advent hymn ever sung. This is not the gentle, tender, dreamy Mary whom we sometimes see in paintings; this is the passionate, surrendered, proud, enthusiastic Mary who speaks out here. This song has none of the sweet, nostalgic, or even playful tones of some of the Christmas carols. It is instead a hard, strong, inexorable song about collapsing thrones and humbled lords of this world, even the power of God and the powerlessness of humankind. These are the tones of the women prophets of the Old Testament that now come to life in Mary’s mouth.<sup>9</sup>

Luke anticipates in the *Magnificat* with what will later be spelt out by Jesus when he goes to the synagogue in Nazareth, unrolls the scroll, and reads a passage from the prophet Isaiah as he announces his mission to liberate the poor and marginalized (Lk 4:18-19). He later spells out this same prophetic message as he proclaims the Beatitudes: Like Mary, the poor understand differently, the meek experience another sort of power and the hungry thirst for justice. Herman Hendricks<sup>10</sup> suggests that Luke was most likely referring

7 Herman Hendrickx, *A Key to the Gospel of Luke* (Quezon City: MST/Claretian Publications, 1992), p. 35.

8 Johnson, p. 334.

9 Sermon preached by Bonhoeffer on the Third Sunday of Advent, 1933; in Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Mystery of Holy Night*, ed., Manfred Weber (New York: Crossroad, 1996), 6. Cited in Johnson, *Truly Our Sister*, p. 267.

10 Hendricks, *The Sermon on the Mount* (Manila: East Asian Pastoral Institute, 1979), p. 35.

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to the urban poor of the city where his community was situated. They are blessed and become the recipients of Jesus' good news. Raymond Brown adds:

Luke's peculiar and emphatic castigation of wealth (6:24-26; 12:19-20; 16:25; 21:1-4) points to the existence of many poor in the communities to be served ... the Magnificat would resonate among such groups; for them the Christian good news meant that the ultimately blessed were not the mighty or the rich who tyrannized them.<sup>11</sup>

Unfortunately, centuries of rote recitation have obscured the boldness of the *Magnificat* as well as its social implications for us today. "The kingdom is about living justly in a world of injustice; and justice is always about bodies and lives."<sup>12</sup> The World Bank estimates that the present economic system with its throw away culture, fails the needs of over 1.2 billion people who suffer from malnutrition, disease and illiteracy and live in squalid surroundings.<sup>13</sup> Their problem is compounded by the negative impact on their environment by ozone-depleting and poisonous chemicals which deplete fertile soils. In recent decades the destruction of the tropical rainforests has led to the rapid acceleration of species extinction which has led E. O. Wilson to remark "(R)uling out nuclear war," the worst thing now taking place in the world is the loss of genetic diversity."<sup>14</sup> And the poor become more and more impoverished. We are therefore invited to ponder anew Mary's Magnificat:

... coming from the young Mary's voice, from the wombs and the bodies of this meeting of women, it remains in the air, forever shouting out God's actions among men and women and proclaiming down the centuries that the powerful will be overthrown, that the rich will be empty. And that the little/humble people will be rewarded in the dynamic of the reign of God, which is made flesh in the community of believers.<sup>15</sup>

11 Raymond Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah* (New York: Image Books, 1979), p. 351.

12 John Dominic Crossan, *The Birth of Christianity: Discovering what Happened in the Years Immediately after the Execution of Jesus* (New York: HarperCollins, 1998), p. xxx.

13 Sean McDonagh, *Passion for the Earth: The Christian Vocation to Promote Justice, Peace and the Integrity of Creation* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1994), p. 8.

14 Cited in Sean McDonagh, p. 111.

15 Carmina Navia, "Mary of Nazareth revisited," *The Many Faces of Mary*, Concilium, Diego Irarrazaval, Susan Ross and Miriam Therese Winter (London: SCM Press, 2008/4), p. 25.

## THE MAGNIFICAT: A TEXT THAT LINGERS, A WORD THAT EXPLODES

Walter Brueggemann,<sup>16</sup> the Old Testament scholar explains that when a scriptural text is spoken or read and received by the listener in different times and communities, the text lingers on through time; it is “recharged” with fresh meanings by successive readings. When the text is reflected upon and spoken again it becomes a moment of revelation, “the present is freshly illuminated and reality is irreversibly transformed.” In the intimate relationship between the text and the reader the timeless word appears, bearing with it revelation for the day. Its meaning is explored from the perspective of new situations and it discloses, Brueggemann writes, “something about that moment that would, without this utterance, not be known, seen, heard, or made available.” The *Magnificat* is an excellent illustration of the lingering of a treasured tradition which is reflected upon and “recharged” with fresh meanings, and explodes into new usage in different cultural and historical contexts.

The song of praise that was sung by Hannah erupted with new usage and remarkable imagination as it was spoken again to the poor and afflicted of Luke’s community. It erupts again, lingers on and explodes again with new meaning amid the efforts of communities and movements to redefine themselves in the face of globalization amid the horrors of the constantly reopened wounds in such places as Syria, Iraq, Yemen and Southern Sudan. It explodes amid the uprootedness of more than a 20 million political refugees – a churning of peoples and cultures unprecedented in world history. With the growing multiculturalism of our cities and towns, where the faceless poor are often pushed to the margins, migrants are a threat and refugees are an embarrassment, we see a world-wide split between a more or less small upper class profiting from the world market, a middle class, most of whom are losing out more and more, and a vast majority of impoverished and excluded nations. Pictures of the gaunt and emaciated bodies of starving Yemeni children across our TV screens are a reminder of an appalling daily tragedy that is allowed to continue. The high death rate from the Covid 19 pandemic in countries like India and Brazil where the poor do not have access to vaccines or medical supplies, is a scandal and a blight on our Christian conscience.

In the midst of these depressing realities the Spirit groans with the cries of the oppressed and the pollution of our planet, Mary’s prophetic voice needs to be heard again in our world. Her message, intended for all the lowly and the miserable explodes

16 Walter Brueggemann, “Texts the Linger: Words, that Explode,” *Theology Today*, Vol. 54. No 2, July 1977, p. 180- 199.

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with even greater urgency today as we try to form communities that contemplatively reflect the mystical interrelatedness of all reality and that pour themselves out in compassionate living, and reverence for all God's people and for the cosmos. In the words of Bishop Pedro Casildaliga of Brazil, Mary is "so full of God, yet so much ours."<sup>17</sup>

### 'AND THE ANGEL LEFT HER' (LK 1:38)

The angel has departed and she is on her own now, ready to assume responsibility for carrying out God's mission and together with Joseph, bringing up her son and nourishing his faith. Like the wise scribe, she is silent and ponders (see Sir 39:1-3) in her heart, interiorizing the mystery in the core of her being (Lk 2:19). While she "did not grasp immediately all that she had heard but listened willingly, letting events sink into her memory and seeking to work out their meaning,"<sup>18</sup> she preserved, remembered, and treasured these events as she tried to interpret her life. Mary's was a life in the process of becoming as she actively contemplated the word of God.<sup>19</sup> Although she did not always understand Jesus' mission, she remained faithful to the end, pondering all these things in her heart (Lk 2:51). There is a moment in our lives when our angels leave us too and we are left on our own to ponder, to treasure, and to interiorize the divine mystery in the core of our being. Like Mary we may not always understand the happenings in our lives but we seek to interpret their meaning and strive to remain faithful. We continue pondering in our heart (Lk 2:51).

The invitation to hear the Word and live out that Word in compassionate action is as urgent in today's world of global structures of oppression as it was in first century Galilee under Roman occupation. In a world suffering from ecological devastation, global heating, militarism, starvation and poverty seem to dominate. In this present contemporary struggle, Christians can claim Mary as a critical symbol of compassionate love. Mary's *Magnificat* praising God for compassion made flesh in her womb, lingers on amid the unjust structures of our world, and explodes with new meaning amid the horrors of the constantly reopened wounds in such places as Syria, Palestine, Yemen, Afghanistan, Iraq and southern Sudan. At this moment as I write, car parks in India are being converted into crematoria from which never-

17 This is an English translation of the Spanish title of a book of Marian poetry: *Llena de Dios y tan Nuestra*. by Bishop Pedro Casildaliga in Brazil:

18 Raymond E. Brown et al., *Mary in the New Testament* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press and Paulist, 1978) pp. 150-151.

19 Johnson, *Truly Our Sister*, p. 278.

ending plumes of ash ascend from pyres of burning bodies. These crematoria, overloaded with bodies, are clouding the skies over some of the country's biggest cities. The message of the *Magnificat* therefore needs to be heard again today, if we are to care for our sick and needy brothers and sisters. It is an urgent call and an invitation to empower the lost, the lowly, and the "bottom billion" – the "surplus people" of our world.

**Holy prudence.** For Ignatius, 'holy prudence' is the attitude that is taught by the Holy Spirit. Coming first among the cardinal virtues (prior to justice, fortitude and temperance), prudence consists in the capacity to pick the right criterion when deciding to act. The gift of counsel depends on it. It stands at the heart of moral reflections, both for the philosophers of old and for the scholastic tradition. It can be described as the wisdom of action. Thomas Aquinas taught that no means should be neglected to acquire the qualities of prudence: taking instruction from those known to possess it; learning how to reason well so that self-deceptions can be avoided in reaching a decision; bearing in mind all the circumstances; preventing any evil from taking over the action; knowing how to foresee. Prudence, as the capacity to choose the means to act in specific circumstances, provides itself with rules of action, with criteria. To act without any criteria would surely be to follow blind impulse or passion

– PATRICK C. GOUJON, SJ, *Counsels of the Holy Spirit*, 2021 (Dublin: Messenger Publications) p.36.