

Bill Kupersmith

The Wild Mountain Magnificat: A Sermon Preached at New Song Episcopal Church, Coralville, Iowa, the 22nd December 2024, the 4th Sunday of Advent

In this morning's service we have a canticle in place of the usual psalm. What's the difference? Well, basically that psalms come from the book of Psalms. Canticles come from anywhere else in the Bible. And today's is very special, because it pertains to the events surrounding the birth of the Messiah as related in the gospel according to Saint Luke, who also gives us some fascinating details about Jesus' childhood, as well as the birth of John the Baptist. It appears that Luke originally began at what is now his third chapter, with John preaching repentance on the banks of the river Jordan, where Saint Mark also commences, at the start of Jesus' public ministry. But then Luke seems to have got hold of some accounts of what happened earlier – the birth stories of both John and of Jesus. Both involve the Angel Gabriel, who announces to the elderly priest Zechariah that his aged wife Elizabeth will bear a son, and then even more remarkably to a very young virgin betrothed to a man named Joseph that she is already pregnant by the power of God.

Luke ties these two stories together, for it seems Elizabeth and Mary are related, and Mary goes to visit Elizabeth, who congratulates Mary on her status. And Mary responds with a hymn of praise to God, beginning 'My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord.' But 'proclaims the greatness' is only one word in Greek, *Μεγαλόνει*, and so too in Latin from whence which we get our title, the *Magnificat*. It has a very close parallel in the Old Testament both in substance and setting, which we in last month's liturgy for 17 November, 1st Samuel 2.1-10, Hannah's celebrating becoming the mother of Samuel. It began: 'My heart exults in the Lord; / my strength is exalted in my God,' with not just a similar sentiment to Luke's song of Mary, but the same parallel structure. The next verse of Mary's Magnificat 'for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant' echoes closely the start of Hannah's earlier prayer for a son, 'O Lord of hosts, if only you will look on the misery of your servant, and remember me, and not forget your servant.' This is the polite mode in Biblical Hebrew for making a request of a superior, the petitioner refers to herself using the third person, just as in the 18th-century you closed a letter to a nobleman with 'your Lordship's most obedient and humble servant.' In the Greek original of Luke's gospel, though, the word translated 'lowliness' is *ταπεινῶσιν*; in the LXX exactly the same word is used to translate the Hebrew word Hannah used for 'misery' - *ταπεινῶσιν*. That is no mere coincidence; it's a giveaway to the canticle's origin.

Besides 1st Samuel, the Magnificat is full of Old Testament parallels – to seven different psalms as well as the book of Job. Considering all those parallels, I was embarrassed with rather irreverent thought crossed my mind when I found an old-fashioned pietistical Roman Catholic commentary telling us that the Magnificat was uttered by Mary when she was inspired by the Holy Spirit, that it looked like the Holy Ghost was doing a bit of self-plagiarism. All the Old Testament borrowings in the Magnificat come from the Greek LXX, not the Hebrew original. Not something a sixteen-year-old girl might know. Some scholars think that Saint Luke could have written it himself, but I doubt that. Luke likes to collect and assemble bits and pieces, not make stuff up out of whole cloth. The author was probably a Greek speaking Jew who was deeply read Holy Scripture, but in the LXX version, perhaps like the author of the Wisdom of

Solomon, whom I talked about a while back. But given the mention of ‘God my Saviour’ in the second verse, quite possibly that author was a Greek-speaking Jewish Christian of the sort that Saint Luke was likely to have encountered as he was collecting material for his version of the gospel. After working out his main narrative for Jesus’ career, perhaps this anonymous source led Luke to the informants for the other stories of the birth and childhood of both John the Baptist and Jesus that comprise the first two chapters of the final version.

But you’ve perhaps noticed that in today’s liturgy we’ve heard this canticle twice – not only in the gospel reading, but first instead of a psalm after the Old Testament lesson. For the Magnificat is one of the most ancient and most frequent in Christian worship. It is recited, chanted, or sung every evening - *Magnificat anima mea Dominum: / et exultavit spiritus meus in Deo salutari meo* – in the service of Vespers, one of the seven services that comprise the monastic daily office. Throughout the Middle Ages it was sung in plainchant and in the Renaissance in polyphonic settings by such masters as Byrd and Tallis. The 16th-century reformers cut the number of services down to but two, requiring the ‘Magnificat (or the song of the blessed virgin Mary)’ and explicitly directing it be ‘in English’ so that simple laymen could understand it. They expected we all would say it every day; I fear I disappoint them except when I’m ill or the weather is terrible. Today though in our Eucharistic service Linda has kindly let us use a contemporary version I hope the reformers would approve. Although the tune sounds ancient, it’s really not all that old, though it can be traced back to the 18th-century. As *Wild Mountain Time*, it was first performed in the 1950s. But it is a haunting melody whose simplicity agrees perfectly with Mary and her complete submission to God’s will.

I am lowly as a child,
But I know from this day forward
That my name will be remembered,
For all will call me blessed.

That theme of lowliness, expressed in the Greek word ταπεινῶσιν in the original and the Latin word *humilitatem* in the medieval versions, characterises perfectly Mary’s perfect obedience to God’s will. When I hear the chorus to this setting of the Magnificat performed:

Through all generations!
Everlasting is your mercy
To the people you have chosen,
And holy is your name.

I feel a shiver down my spine and I tear up. Just as the shepherds on the morning of Jesus’ birth were privileged to hear the voices of the angelic choir as they sang the Gloria at the service of Matins before God’s throne, I like to imagine that I am already experiencing a foretaste of hearing the heavenly choir as the Seraphim, in the presence of the risen Jesus and his Blessed Mother, intone their most perfect version of the Magnificat. Let us all hope and pray that we, in the company of all the saints, will attend that everlasting celebration.