

Tidings of comfort and joy? Seriously?

Pitt Street Uniting Church, 11 December 2016

A Contemporary Reflection by Rev Dr Margaret Mayman

Advent 3A

Isaiah 35: 1-10 Luke 1: 46b-55 The Magnificat (sung);
Contemporary Reading: “*Called to Say Yes*” by Edwina Gateley, from
There Was No Path So I Trod One (1996); Matthew 11: 2-11

This reflection can be viewed on You Tube at <http://www.pittstreetuniting.org.au/> under “Sunday Reflections” tab

The third Sunday in Advent is traditionally the Sunday of Joy - that we capture in the lighting of the pink candle - the Sunday of Joy and Gaudete Sunday. That pink candle instead of the more sombre candles that mark the weeks associated with hope, peace and love. Today we have the lightness, the pinkness of joy.

The carols that we will sing at Christmas tell of tidings of comfort and joy, but often by the third Sunday in Advent joy is not at the top of our pre-Christmas to do list.

Advent joy is real but there is also a sense in which it is not yet fully realised. The reading from the prophet Isaiah speaks of joy in the image “*The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad, the desert shall rejoice and blossom; like the crocus it shall blossom abundantly, and rejoice with joy and singing.*” This is joy that is intertwined with hope. That which shall be is not yet.

The prophecy imagines God's reach beyond creation on to including all of humanity. The good news at Advent is that God has not left us alone but that the God who cares for the dry and empty places cares for each of us and all of us, showing up in the desert places of life to await us in restoration and salvation.

The God who cares for the earth also cares for us, offering change not only in the wilderness but also for all who are faint in heart and weak at the knees. Such joy is not superficial happiness but profound renewal.

This morning we had two gospel readings one from Matthew that we heard read and one from Luke that we sang. Mary's song – the Magnificat: Tell out my soul the glory of the Lord!

Matthew's story of John the Baptist in prison seems at first reading to fit less well with the call to joy. There is not much joyful about John's situation. He is in prison for confronting Herod, for speaking truth to power. All that he had hoped for, even in the coming of Jesus, had turned to custard. In chains and in crisis, John is wondering if he has staked his life on the wrong promise and the wrong person.

The Messiah, whom John had recognised in Jesus, was supposed to change the world so that tyrants like Herod would be deposed. In the reading from last week John imaged the messiah coming with an axe that would reduce the tree of Jesse to a stump, and coming with fire, to renew the world.

So this downhearted and disillusioned John sent a message to Jesus who pointed him not to actions of destruction and power but to acts of healing for the excluded and liberation for the poor, telling the stories of lives transformed by their encounters with Jesus. Commentator Debbie Thomas suggests that is as if Jesus is saying to John: "*Who I am will emerge in the lives of ordinary people all around you if only you consent to see and hear.*"

Thomas also addresses Jesus cryptic instruction that people are blessed who do not take offence at Jesus, suggesting that taking no offence means a willingness to stay present, not to turn away, even in the face of terrible stories, stories that end in imprisonment and death.

For as much as we see Jesus' presence in joy and hope, he is also there in suffering and failure, in the lives of all who will spend this Christmas in the camps on Nauru and Manus Island, in all the places in Australia and around the globe where human rights are denied, with all for whom there is no joy.

John, we are told, died in prison. He did not see the fulfilment of the promises of Isaiah or Jesus. And yet, ironically, I read that John is the patron saint of spiritual joy.

To understand how this can be, we turn to the second gospel reading, the one we sang together with hopeful joy "*Tell out my soul.*"

Mary's song comes in the context of her visit to her older cousin Elizabeth to share news of her apparently inconvenient pregnancy. Elizabeth is also pregnant; with John. In the verses leading up to Mary's song, we are told that as Mary approached Elizabeth, the child in Elizabeth's womb leapt for joy.

Given the path that John's life would take we can perhaps begin to understand that joy, in the Biblical sense, is not soft and fluffy but hard and edgy. It is not superficial or sentimental. It is not piety that avoids hard questions, crises of faith and lack of justice.

John asks Jesus, "*are you the one who is coming?*" Jesus tells liberations stories and lovingly asks John to decide for himself.

So this Advent, we sing Mary's song again to recall the promise, to name the stories of hope, to know joy not in the sense of turning away from all that is unjust and painful but joy in the sense of a powerful energy for transformation that will endure despite all that is currently broken in the world.

Like Mary we are called to say *Yes!* Yes to a vision and a vocation. Her song of spirit and joy that only makes sense in the context of hope. Mary and Elizabeth, Jesus and John, children yet to be, are bound together in this turning point of human history.

So standing on Elizabeth's doorstep, Mary sings. She sings out of her own experience, her own hope, but also out of the experience and hope of her people.

The Magnificat is an expression of joy at God's promises kept, a celebration of the tables being turned, or overturned; the lowly are lifted up, the proud are brought down, and the hungry are fed. God remembers the people of Israel, and the promises God made to them.

I think it is crucial that when we sing Mary's song, that she sang in the presence of Elizabeth and their unborn children. The news of her pregnancy came when she was alone. The annunciation of God's vision for the world came in company with another woman whom she loved and who loved her. As Henri Nouwen noted: "*Thus, God's most radical intervention into history was listened to and received in community.*"

It struck me again, as I was reading it, that The Magnificat is a one woman festival of dangerous ideas. Nearly forty years ago, it was banned by the military regime in Guatemala because unlike the generals understood that unlike "*Away in a Manger*" this song had the power to cause poor communities to rise up, to resist oppression.

Mary as a bearer of dangerous ideas contrasts strongly with the way she has been so often portrayed in Christian tradition and popular culture.

During the week, I read a very good blog by Nancy Rockwell titled "*No More Lies about Mary.*"¹

She claimed that the subjugation of Mary, the maligning of her as meek, mild, and mindless, has been harmful to millions of women over many centuries.

Rockwell points out that it is Mary's grace that has attracted God's attention. "*And what is this grace?*" She says! "*It is what Luke shows us in her conversation and her actions – courage, boldness, grit, ringing convictions about justice. Not submissive meekness. Grace is not submission. And the power of God is never meek.*" Mary talks back to the angel, negotiating the encounter with the holy, enquiring: "*how is this possible when I have no husband?*"

I can't relay all of Rockwell's argument here but one aspect I found very interesting. We are often told that Mary is a teenager, a young teenager at that, but Luke does not tell us her age. In fact, the subversive political content of the Magnificat, Mary's deep thought and strong conviction, are at odds with that claim that she is very young.

I've talked before about how Matthew's use of the word virgin comes from an unfortunate mistranslation of a Hebrew word for young woman. Rockwell, however, notes that the Greek word Luke uses for virgin is an unusual one, a very specific word that means she has not yet borne a child. Its precise meaning does not indicate sexual inexperience. So Rockwell says, rather bluntly, "*let's be clear: the focus is on (Mary's) uterus. The state of her hymen is not at issue here.*"

The way this story is usually told, with an emphasis on Mary's acceptance of pregnancy has been used to bully women into the belief that marriage and childbirth is God's highest calling for women.

¹ <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/biteintheapple/no-more-lying-about-mary/>

In fact the story tells us that Mary, an unmarried woman, received an invitation from an angel and then she makes her own independent decision without the permission of clergy, or parents, to bear this child of promise and joy.

Mary's grace, valued by God, noticed by God, involved boldness, independence, risk-taking and unashamed courage. She decides to bear a holy child for a radical agenda: to bring the mighty down from their thrones; to scatter the proud in the imagination of their hearts, to fill the hungry with good things and send the rich away empty.

When the time comes, she is gutsy enough to give birth in a barn full of animals. She is determined, not domestic; free, not foolish; holy, not helpless; strong, not submissive. She beckons women everywhere to speak out for God's justice, which is waiting to be born into the world.

In the 14th century the mystic Meister Eckhart wrote: "*We are all called to be mothers of God – for God is always waiting to be born.*"

Mary calls us all, women and men, old and young, to participate, as she did, in the birth of God.

Tidings of comfort and joy?

Yes, truly in the story of Mary are tidings, maybe not of comfort, but undoubtedly of joy.