

Advent IV, 2011, B

The “Magnificat” (the Song of Mary – canticle 15 – from Luke 1:46ff) is no doubt the most well known (favorite) canticle of the Episcopal Church. I remember as an acolyte when I was a child reading this canticle at every Morning Prayer service, as well as at services we did in Nursing Homes or other places. What I find so ODD, is that the meaning of this canticle should TROUBLE many in the Episcopal Church, right down to the last dollar in their saving account!

We can't totally escape our heritage as a Church made up of wealthy merchants and the elite of society. The Episcopal Church at times has been called “the republican party at prayer” as well as “the country club church.” There are jokes about “we don't understand all this talk about evangelism, everyone who *should* be a part of the Episcopal Church already *is!*” THANK GOD THE CHURCH IS CHANGING!!!!

But, just think of a wealthy merchant or elite land owner reading the words of the Magnificat. God has “scattered the proud in their conceit”. God has “cast down the mighty from their thrones and has lifted up the lowly.” God has “filled the hungry with good things and the rich he has sent empty away.” So, if you are conceited or powerful or rich, you better beware, God's coming to replace you with the humble, lowly, and hungry, those faithful of God who “rejoice to behold his appearing.”

The Magnificat of course is the response of Mary to the visitation by the angel Gabriel, who tells Mary she will be giving birth to a child who is to be called “Jesus” (God saves). To which Mary responds, with trepidation and fear. We know this because Gabriel says “be not afraid Mary”. Mary ends up with the statement of faith: “let it be according to your word.” Her soul then proclaims the greatness of the Lord, and her spirit rejoiced in God, her savior.

The week before last, on the liturgical calendar was the celebration of the Feast of the Immaculate Conception. This was not about the “immaculate conception” of Jesus. This was about the “immaculate conception” of Mary. But, before you dismiss the thought out of hand, let me tell you what is behind it. The feast of the Immaculate Conception is 9 months before the birth of Mary. It doesn't mean Mary was born of a virgin, she had human

mother and father. What it means is that she was “immaculate” (clean) since her “conception”, that is, without “original sin”. Original sin was thought to mean that human beings since their birth do not have “perfect charity”, like God. Yet Mary, says the Roman Catholic Church, had “perfect charity”, which she shows in her willingness to allow herself to be used as a vessel for God’s message to become incarnate in her flesh. The Orthodox, Lutherans, and many Anglicans also celebrate the “immaculate conception” although they understand it in a little bit different way. Yet, all see Mary as *the example of the free and willing cooperation between God and humanity*. Interesting that Mary’s purity was adopted by Islam as well, and is even included in the Qur’an.

Let’s move back to the Old Testament lesson today and bring another thought into this. You’ll notice in the reading from 2 Samuel today, the conversation moves from David wanting to make God a house of cedar to dwell in (not unlike the one he had built for himself after he consolidated his power), to God telling David through Nathan that he has always moved around among the people in ark of covenant. God then shifts the conversation, making a promise to David, that he will make him into a great “house”. This covenant isn’t about a building to dwell in, but a family legacy.

In Luke’s way of thinking, David’s “house” (family legacy) continued to be great (even after his offspring after Solomon failed miserably) because the **“house” of David is continued in Mary’s womb. You might remember that the Ark of the Covenant held the ten commandments, God’s “word” to God’s people. For the Orthodox, Mary’s womb becomes a type of “Ark of the Covenant” which holds the “word” of God made flesh in Jesus.**

“Selected Praises of Mary from the Agathestos Hymn,” Greek, sixth century.

Hail, thou, the restoration of the fallen Adam;

hail, thou, the redemption of the tears of Eve.

Hail, heavenly ladder by which God came down;

hail, bridge leading from earth to heaven . . .

Hail, land of promise;

hail, thou from who flows forth milk and honey.

Hail, space for the uncontained God;

hail, door of solemn mystery.

Mary's act of faithfulness and charity, saying "yes" to God, becomes her life's greatest purpose. ***Will opening our lives to do God's call manifest our greatest purpose in life?*** Are we willing to say YES to God's prompting, like Mary? Many of us say: "wait a minute! What does that mean? What does God want me to do?" **The thought is a bit disconcerting, isn't it?** Yet, when we allow God to have God's way with us, well . . . **nothing is impossible with God! We are ambassadors of God's hope in the world.**

Jesus is coming, are we ready to receive him? Or are we awfully comfortable in the way life is now? Too comfortable to want to change! How do we **become the change we want to see in the world around us?**

*Vijay was a man who lived in India and had everything going for him - a stable job in a renowned business, an income that was more than he knew what to do with, and a comfortable lifestyle. Yet, Vijay knew that his happiness did not lie in material acquisitions. His bottom line was about doing something that brought him mental satisfaction, gave meaning to his life and a sense of purpose to his existence. When Vijay heard about a training program about educating people about HIV, he thought this was something he could do and feel good about it. So he went to the seminar confident about his knowledge of HIV. After all, who hadn't heard about it through Television and reading articles? Yet, as Vijay learned about the enormity of the infection and its implications for society he found his calling – **to be able to communicate the need for action to each and every person – helping them prepare and develop a sense of compassion and empathy in the society at large.** He found himself at the forefront of an initiative to educate others about HIV, dispelling the sources of misconceptions and misinformation in society. **He grew to understand how dire the need was to change the way people perceived the virus and to remove notions that it spawned.** As he stepped back into the "real world", his calling became even clearer as one night his neighbors knocked on his door – asking for advice to help a family member who was just diagnosed with HIV.*

Jesus is coming, are we ready to receive him and like Mary, be a willing bearer of a message of HOPE – that nothing is impossible with God?