

Gisborne Reflection for 22 December 2019

Reading: Luke 1: 26 – 56

Reflection: AMAZING LOVE

- *Mary's story and the Magnificat*
- *God's unique Christmas gift and blessing*
- *Are you ready for the gift of love to transform you?*
- *Lives changed with signs of love*

Mary experienced many emotions as she was visited by the angel – fear, anxiety, questioning and acceptance - but she finally came to joy. Mary's song of joy was her response to God giving her a special task - the news of the gift that would come to the world through her.

Jesus is the supreme Christmas gift to each of us – the real gift, the proper gift, the AMAZING gift – and we give gifts to each other to remind ourselves of that great gift. But I wonder how many people actually think of that now – and perhaps more importantly what does God's gift really mean to us, those who claim to be followers of Jesus and people of God's way?

Advertisements encouraging us to buy from a particular store the “proper Christmas presents”, the “perfect presents”, “the right presents”, “the presents you deserve” disturb me. Maybe they disturb you too? We know why such phrases are used - businesses naturally use the opportunity of Christmas to persuade people, us, that we need to buy each other expensive gifts. But they even try to tell us what is a “proper” Christmas gift, the right gift. For me that detracts even more from the gospel message of the supreme gift. The amazing gift of love that means God is with us.

Jesus came into this world as a helpless baby – yet Jesus is the supreme Christmas gift to each of us – the real gift, the AMAZING gift – the wonderful gift of love that can bring joy to all - but we need to unwrap the meaning of this gift.

Let me take you first to another Biblical story that may help us understand the profound meaning of Jesus being born to a young woman and coming into the world as a baby.

In 2 Samuel chapter 7 we find that David was promised his descendants would be kings. Jesus was born in the Davidic line so he fulfilled that promise. Often that is all the connection that is made between these stories– but there is more. You see King David had a plan: he wanted to build a temple to house the Ark of the Covenant – the symbol of God's presence among the people. King David wanted to build a house for God. God told Nathan the prophet to tell King David that he was not to do that but David tried to put his plan into action anyway. There was eventually a stone temple built as the house of God for the people of Israel but it was built by David's son, Solomon. The temple became a symbol that God was living amongst the people, it pointed the way towards the living God – but it remained an ambiguous signpost because the people kept straying away from trusting God.

Mary was told that she was to become, in essence, a temporary dwelling-place of the living God - the same God who would not be contained in a house constructed by David. Yet the presence of the Holy Spirit, and the “overshadowing of the Most High” both evoke the idea of the temple. God chose to use incarnation, becoming human, being one of us - as the way to really show us that God is with us and what God's love is like and what it means to live God's way.

Mary was visited by an angel. Throughout the Bible and Jewish tradition, angels were understood to be messengers from God. The angel's first words to Mary were “Peace be with you! The Lord is with you and has greatly blessed you.” At these words Mary was deeply troubled and wondered

what was meant - and she was afraid. The angel reassured her “Don’t be afraid, Mary; God has been gracious to you.” - and Mary heard the news of what was to happen to her. Remember, Mary was probably a young teenager – in the Jewish society of that time the age of betrothal for girls in preparation for marriage was usually 12 or 13 years old. She was young, very young - and this was an awesome message – not only that she was to have a child but that child was to be called the Son of God. May I encourage you not to get sidetracked by questions about whether you can believe in a virgin birth, or angels for that matter, but focus on the message of this story for you. What is the spiritual message that you need to learn and grasp today? What is the message for you about the love of God?

Mary moved from feeling very afraid to being troubled, and then wondering “how can this be?” The angel assured her that *The Holy Spirit will come upon you and God’s power will rest on you.* - words that remind us of what Jesus said to his disciples. Mary’s response was “I am the Lord’s servant. May it happen to me as you have said”. Mary said “yes” to God. In contrast David had his own plan. Sometimes we experience difficulties because we are trying to follow our own plans instead of saying yes to God. When Mary accepted God’s message she was able to lose her fear, stop feeling troubled, express her joy - and she wanted to praise God. She made room for God in her life. That is how it can be with us. If we stop being afraid, by trusting God; stop being troubled - by handing those troubles over to God, and accepting what happens to us; make room for God – then we can experience God’s love, a unique Christmas gift and blessing, and the kind of deep joy that overcomes whatever we are going through. God surprised Mary with a task beyond her wildest dreams - to be the mother of a very special child in whom would be the Spirit of God.

Mary accepted the task and responsibility and wanted to share the amazing news with her cousin Elizabeth. I guess by the time Mary had walked over the hills to see Elizabeth, she had had plenty of time to think about the awesome message from the angel. After she had thought things over and talked with Elizabeth, Mary bursts into a song of praise. Her song is known as the Magnificat – from the Latin translation of the Bible. Magnificat means ‘she praised God’. Mary’s response is not now one of fear but she sings about the glory of God’s powerful love that has chosen her to carry the Christ-child. Mary is lowly, poor, unimportant. She sings because she recognises that God works through people like her. She sings because she knows that the history of her people shows that God acts with justice and mercy to lift those who are considered lowly, to scatter those who are proud, and feed those who are hungry. As recorded in Luke 1 verses 50 and 55, Mary even sings for all the generations who have hoped, and hope even now, for God’s vision of justice for all, to come to fullness in their lives. Mary’s praise is anchored by the promise made to the descendants of Abraham – the promise of becoming a nation that would be a blessing to all the families of the earth.

God’s saving ways are full of surprises. God chooses young Mary to be the mother of Jesus the Christ. Mary’s prophetic voice invites us to rejoice in God’s justice that seems shocking and upside-down in the world’s eyes. We are invited to share Mary’s vision of wholeness and healing with the world – and to live God’s way and be just and merciful in all our dealings with others.

In Luke’s Gospel, God works through and with the poor and especially through women, the lowest of the low in that society. So here at the beginning of Luke we have two women, Elizabeth and Mary, who are especially blessed by God. And in Mary’s response is one of the most memorable songs of praise, joy and hope, echoing parts of Isaiah, as she prepares for the birth of this amazing child who will change the world. We too have the opportunity to prepare ourselves to celebrate again the birth of Jesus, but the meaning for us is about more than preparation – it is about understanding how the Christ is continually reborn in us. Mary’s prophetic voice invites us to share her vision of wholeness and healing with the world – and to live God’s way and be just and merciful in all our dealings with others. Christ continually reborn in us can make that happen.

You may recall Jesus' manifesto in Luke chapter 4 when Jesus quotes Isaiah 61 and states quite clearly "the Spirit of the Lord is upon me because he has chosen me to bring good news to the poor, to proclaim freedom to captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to set free the oppressed and announce that the time has come when the Lord will save his people."

Mary's song and Mary's vision are part of Luke's way of showing us that vision of Isaiah, fulfilled in Jesus. That vision can set people on fire, it could dramatically change and transform individuals and the world – if we recognise that God is with us and in us and that the Spirit of God wants us to continue to share the good news of hope and healing for all. Mary's song is lovely and we could just see it as a song of praise – but it is actually about a revolution. The message of this song, like the visions of Isaiah and Micah, could set people on fire, it could dramatically change and transform individuals and the world. **So will we let it do that for us?**

If we really understand what Mary's song means we will be involved in at least three aspects of transformation through God's gift of love. *Personal* transformation, *social* transformation which is about seeing other people differently, changing the way in which we label people – God wants us to stop ranking people according to wealth, prestige, power, position or possessions - all people are equal in God's sight. The third aspect of transformation is *economic* revolution: Mary sang "God gives the hungry good things to eat and sends the rich away with nothing". Historian Keith Sinclair has written about the religion of New Zealand being simple materialism. Everyone is out to get more - and as much as they can. Yet we need to be different. As followers of Jesus and people of God, we need to recognise that we are simply stewards of all that we have, we don't own it, we have just been given responsibility for how it is used.

The Spirit of God is the fire and energy that enables us to see ourselves for who we really are and what we can be in God, to recognise that all people are equal in God's sight – and to make a difference in the world. Jesus came to show us the way to make that difference. If we are really serious about the gospel, we will want to put God's love into action. Jesus came into this world as a human being and showed us what God is like. God is love beyond all telling. The gift of Christmas is that the love of God is with us. That love of God can flow through us to others, if we let that transformation happen. Are you ready to see the love of God flowing? Are you ready to recognise the love of God in you?

Joy Cowley has reshaped Mary's song of praise in a way that may resonate with you. (HS 62)
Magnificat

When the love of God fills our inmost heart space, it does bring to birth in us the Holy One. God with us and within us. Advent and Christmas are an opportunity for us to rethink what it means to follow Jesus and for God to be within us. Jesus came as love to the world and the light of the world. Jesus calls us to follow him and learn from him. The work of Christmas is revolutionary. It is about serving others in God's name - healing broken souls with love. Can we make a commitment to do that? There will be joy *and* sorrow on the journey but God is with us.

Mary's child, God's child, is a clear shining light, the truth of our life and the hope of the world. This child of the Christmas story is the gift of love that shows us God is with us. Are you ready to accept the gift of Christmas and to commit to letting God transform you and help you to live God's way? If so, may God richly bless you. Then we will see, every day, signs of God's love in action. Ancient stories come to life in people all around us every day, in you and me every day – if we've got eyes to see. God bless you. Amen

Choir sings *No I've never seen an angel ...*
including 'Ancient stories come to life in people all around us every day ... if we've got eyes to see'