

Sermon preached at Gisborne, 19 December 2021

Lord God, may your word be a lamp to our feet and a light to our path through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Micah 5:2-5a; Luke 1:46-55

Magnifying God

Today we will focus on Mary's song of praise, namely the Magnificat¹ in English 'to magnify.' When we hear 'magnify,' we think of a magnifying glass or lens. Indeed, a definition of the word 'magnify' is 'to increase the apparent size of an object by means of a lens, microscope, etc., or to cause to appear larger.'² Yet, we also find another definition used in scriptures, and in this case, the meaning is much deeper and more real than simply increasing the apparent size or making something appear larger. The original sense of 'magnify' was 'to praise highly, to glorify, to extol,' specifically, 'to praise or render honour to God.' While the modern sense of 'magnify' is connected to appearances, the older sense was to, in fact, 'make greater in size, status, importance, to enlarge, increase, augment, or advance.'³ With this understanding, we'll see that Mary finds a purpose in her life through magnifying the Lord. It also allows her to understand the work of the Lord in the world. Eventually, magnifying God will make the wounded world whole.

Mary has found a new purpose in life when she magnifies the Lord. By our standards, there seems nothing Mary celebrates the blessedness. God has chosen her to be the mother of the messiah, but what does it mean for her? She is a peasant girl from a small village. Her friends and neighbours may see her as a disgrace because she is unmarried and pregnant.⁴ In addition, as she will soon learn from Simeon, being the mother of the messiah doesn't seem full of blessings. She will bear the unspeakable grief of watching as her son is rejected, shamed, and crucified: "This child is destined for the falling and rising of many in Israel ... and a sword will pierce your own soul too."⁵ Despite all this, Mary praises God for honouring her. Furthermore, she perceives God's action in her life as consistent with God's saving action in history. When Mary accepts that things will happen according to God, she perceives that her

¹ In Latin, [my soul] magnifies [the Lord]

² Oxford English dictionary

³ Ditto

⁴ Matthew 1:19

⁵ Luke 2:34-35

life is purposeful in God's plan, although she may not understand it fully. God's ways radically differ from human ways. As the story unfolds, she understands it better through the annunciation, the praise of her cousin Elizabeth for her, and later the prophecy of Simeon. In doing so, she begins to see the work of God, her son, in the world.

Mary's song of praise helps us see the work of God as a whole. When we read Magnificat, it recalls Hannah's song in 1 Samuel 2:1–10. Like Mary, Hannah also experienced a miraculous pregnancy, but in a different way. Like Mary's son, Hannah's son Samuel spoke God's word. Both Hannah and Mary praise God for overturning society's structures by bringing down the powerful and lifting up the powerless. But, Mary's song does not share Hannah's militaristic imagery, for Mary's son will bless not the makers of war but the peacemakers.

In Magnificat, the God saves not just souls but embodied people. The God she praises is not content with only pointing to heaven; God's redemptive work begins here on earth. God fills the hungry not only with hope but with food. Rather than being satisfied with comforting the lowly, Mary's Lord lifts them up, granting them dignity and honour, a seat at the table and a voice in the community. At the same time, God shows strength by disrupting the world's power structures, dethroning rulers, and humbling the mighty. Through the son, God will achieve these things not through violence but through love which will disarm any heavily armed powers. It heals the scars and wounds and makes people whole.

In our story time, we watched a video titled 'Alice and the giant emptiness.' Alice often feels lonely and vulnerable. Alice feels different from the other children through no fault of her own. Others often bullied her because of her old shoes and clothes. She finds it hard to join in with the others in the class and doesn't have the support she needs to catch up. She feels she doesn't fit in and struggles to make friends. Day by day, her confidence erodes, leaving her isolated, feeling lost and empty inside. As we watched it, the giant dark cloud of emptiness penetrates her body and leaves a big hole that would not be covered by her hands. Everybody notices the hole in Alice. The question was, "how is Alice restored to become whole in the end?" As we watched, it was the light that appeared from nowhere. The light touched her one by one and made her whole. By the time the light left her, Alice was a new person. She could step outside from the house where her dear friend was waving at her with a smile. Indeed, the light is the healing power for Alice. But her only friend also plays a vital role as a witness to this transformation before and after. The light in the story can be interpreted differently. As the disciples of Jesus, we see it as the light of Christ. It is also us who Jesus proclaims as the light

of the world. Initially, Mary is terrified when the angel Gabriel informs her of the annunciation. By the time she meets with Elizabeth, Mary realizes that her life has been transformed for good and the world where she is living will not be the same because of the promised son in her womb.

What does the message tell us today? Do we magnify our loving God? If we do, what do we expect to see there? Magnifying God allows us to see who we are on a deeper level. We also understand the purposes God have in our lives individually and collectively. It helps us see the image of God in others too. As if the annunciation has transformed Mary forever, as if the light heals and fills the hole in the body of Alice, we have a duty to heal and fill the holes in people as the children of the light. May God heal and fill all the holes – small or big in us first. May God also help us do the same thing to our neighbours who may not know that the light is coming. May the light enable them to magnify their lives by finding the love of God in them. Amen.