

Sermon for 22.12.24 (St. Thomas's Advent 4C, Micah 5:2-5a, Luke 1:39-56)

Lord Jesus Christ, open our ears, our minds and our hearts to receive your word. Amen

How can the gospel be heard in a culture that says to believe anything without evidence is both naïve and simplistic, and that trust without proof is for the gullible. What is our role as ordinary Christians in this culture, which sees our faith as past its sell by date and irrelevant to the complexities of our everyday life?

This is where we find ourselves today, bewildered by the challenges and deeply conscious of our own inadequacies. This is perhaps where the Israelites found themselves so long ago, living in a culture that was also compromising God's truths, where hypocrisy and corruption were rife, along with a veneer of religiosity.

Imagine then the single lone voice of a prophet, Micah, suddenly rising above all the bleakness, to announce that there is hope of change, salvation will come sometime in the future, not from somewhere large and important, but from the backstreets of the little insignificant town of Bethlehem, belonging to the smallest clan in Judah. It will come from a ruler predestined to fulfil God's plan, who will rule as a shepherd caring for his flock, bringing security and peace.

Would you believe it? Would you trust that lone voice promising salvation? Would you believe that such an unlikely backwater could produce such greatness?

Fast forward some generations to another small town, located in the Judean hillside, to a house on the outskirts, set among the trees.

It's late afternoon and a middle-aged woman comes out of that house into the courtyard to sit for a moment or two on the warm stone seat in the sunshine. Her rough, work worn hands cradle her rounded tummy, and she holds them still for a moment, smiling at the precious swelling and the potential it holds. Perhaps she nods off for a few seconds in the warmth, as all around her is still.....until the unexpected sound of hurrying feet approaching on the dusty path startle her awake, and looking up she sees, silhouetted in the courtyard's entrance, the outline of a much younger woman, untidy from travelling, her veil falling loosely from her head, and she hears a voice she recognises.

Carefully easing herself upright, Elizabeth feels the strongest flutter inside her of her growing son's tiny feet as she hastens to welcome her young cousin Mary. As these two humble, devout and courageous women embrace, there's a miracle of connection, a flooding of understanding, an intuitive, soul-echoing, joyous recognition. Tears of joy follow as the two women share their stories.

Of course Luke doesn't tell us all of that, it's simply my imagination at work, but instead he paints a picture that's far more powerful than mine. As these two women bless each other, praising God, witnessing about their acceptance, their wonder, perhaps even their trepidation and sense of responsibility, each is filled with the Holy Spirit and his power, and their eyes are opened, and their souls are filled with joy. And Mary, well Mary cannot keep from singing.

It's her Magnificat moment. Her song is rooted in Hannah's song from so long ago, it's a song born of a life lived in faith, a life that's known of Micah's prophecy from way back, because it has filtered down from generation to generation through those who've trusted the promise. It abounds with insights about God's upside-down world: how pride and human power and wealth count for very little in God's kingdom, but lowliness and humility and service will indeed be blessed.

A teenager and a woman of mature years, little, ordinary people, both trusting of God to hold them through this radical change in their lives, each blessed by him with a visionary moment that will enable them to bring his gospel to their world, a world much like ours, where people have largely lost their God focus.

Magnificat moments can be wondrous blessings; they're gifts born of faith, of experiences or happenings, that can suddenly flood our souls, filling us up, enlarging our hearts. They're unbidden moments of revelation, of joyous recognition and understanding, as God's presence is suddenly more real than ever before. Such moments are given to strengthen us, to reignite our faith, inspiring and holding us.

Looking back, I think of kneeling in Wells Cathedral when I was licensed as an LLM, of being anointed with oil and the deeply personal words of commission. I think of different services in full churches and singing my heart out. I think of a village church in Yorkshire recently and some words of the vicar resonating in my soul. And here, as the very humble tokens of a wafer and wine are lifted up and linked to the divine, are they not Magnificat moments too, holy spirit inspired and blessed, moments when our hearts might sing?

Trusting is a risky activity and can receive many attacks or setbacks along the way. It requires courage to stand against the majority, to be at times a lone voice or face a different direction from society's focus. But faith was never meant to be simply a private matter, truths held inside and never more publicly declared. We, ordinary humble people, doing our best to follow God's truths in our daily lives, bear the responsibility for bringing them to birth for the generations to come, even in an indifferent or possibly hostile culture. Because how will future generations ever hear the gospel if we fail to openly share it?

So may **our** souls magnify the Lord today, may **our** spirits rejoice in God our Saviour, for he has looked with favour on the lowly state of his servants, and we are blessed indeed. Amen