

My Soul magnifies the Lord Luke 1. 46

It may not come as a surprise when I tell you that I have never been pregnant; and...

neither do I have any plans! At this stage of life, I think my age is against me!!!

I *have* been present at a birth, and experienced that great feeling of joy as new life comes into the world. My wife tells me, also, it was a great relief!!!

In the Gospel reading we heard of two ladies meeting at what today we would call the Antenatal Clinic. Mary and Elizabeth were cousins, and they were both jubilant at the prospect of their first child. St Luke tells us of the great joy they felt at the new life growing within them.

This morning we are in at the start of some good news, and this is not limited to the arrival of babies. We are in at the start of God's plan to widen access for people to his love, widen access for people to find forgiveness and peace in their lives, and the opening of the kingdom of heaven to all.

First in our thinking, we have to consider how this beginning was arrived at. The people of God have a long history of trying to live life in tune with God. In the Old Testament we read of the trials and tribulations faced by people who expressed their faith in God by way of a corporate approach to religious life. They saw themselves as a people chosen by God; they group worshipped in a Temple; there were rituals to be observed to keep God in a happy mood, there were rules and regulations to be followed; every aspect of life designed to encourage a group think towards God. When things went badly, it was taken as self-evident that the group had not been faithful enough, and God was cross. When things went well, they had obviously done something right, and were pleased to have had made God happy.

This approach was always going to be a challenge; people regularly looked across at each other to point the finger at anyone who was letting the side down and putting them at risk. Even today, it is always possible to allow ourselves to get worked up by other people who we think are not keeping the rules, or who

seem to cut corners, or get on better in life than we do. So throughout the Old Testament, the story is of one of painful struggle where the ideal religious expression is always being compromised. The finger could always be pointed. There seemed to be no way out of the consequences for being on the wrong side of God.

In Micah's day times were particularly desperate for this group approach to God. The community of believers were ruled by politically weak kings, the priestly leadership thought that to sacrifice more and more animals would placate a God who was cross with them. Ordinary people knew that it was only a matter of time before the powerful Assyrian Army turned its attention on them, and invasion would not be a comfortable experience.

No one was interested in what Micah had to say: how was a poet talking in riddles going to change things? Micah's writings are full of anger against the weakness of the King and the self-obsession of the Priests. At the same time he waxes lyrical about the promise that God

would use this weakness to bring peace to people who lived their lives in constant fear. And people wondered how peace was *ever* going to happen?

Improbably, Micah proposed that a new leader would emerge from Bethlehem: the smallest village, in the smallest area, with the smallest population of any tribe. Not only that, if we had read on, the mighty Assyrians would be met by shepherds!

You can understand why people were not impressed; how would shepherds beat off a well-armed army? Has the world gone mad? you would be entitled to ask.

Within 100 years the whole structure of Temple Judaism had been swept away by the Assyrians; no shepherds had come to the rescue.

Gradually over the centuries people came to see that God is not some omnipotent wishing to see organised religion defended at all costs. People began to realise that peace with God could be found in whatever situation a person faced.

By the time the anonymous hand behind the letter to the Hebrews was writing, organised religion had been restored in Jerusalem following the return from exile in Babylon under a new empire of the Persians. But the result was no better than in Micah's day. The approach to God remained rules based, and on making extra sacrifices of animals and birds in an effort to placate what was seen as an angry God. The Persians had given way to the Greeks, who in turn had given way to the Romans. Religious freedom was as far away as ever, their peace with God never achieved.

It was this failed structure of religion to which both John the Baptist and Jesus came proclaiming the Good News to the people. They emerged from the wilderness to insist on a different approach. In this ministry they caught the imagination of the local population. There was much that appealed: the talk of personal repentance, the example of mutual caring for people in their community, and the idea that God's kingdom was close at hand.

On offer here was an alternative life-style which offered the promise of peace with God

whatever the position of the political and religious establishment. God's kingdom was closer than could be imagined, and could be lived as if it was already an established reality, despite the challenges of physical existence.

The Letter to the Hebrews is a work written to show to the political and religious establishment of 1<sup>st</sup> Century Jerusalem that they could safely turn to a Christ who had been sacrificed once for all, who had died, and whom God had raised to new life. The writer sets out, in the tradition of Micah, that making sacrifices, and following tradition, and keeping Temple worship going at all costs was not providing people with the all-important relationship with God. Only the sacrifice made by Jesus, which brings to an end all group think was going to make possible a personal inner peace and a lasting relationship with God.

So profound are the insights within the letter to the Hebrews that it automatically found a place in the New Testament. Whilst the Letter is the most technical theology to be found in the New Testament, we can all benefit from reading the

arguments made in favour of God's action in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus.

It was left to Gospel writers such as St Luke to bring to life, in story-telling, the practical reality which underlies the theology expressed in the letter to the Hebrews.

What better story to tell of new life, than the joy of motherhood, and of parenthood. You children, here and looking in by Zoom, need to know that your parents are the proudest people on earth when they see you growing up. Never mind that they are sometimes busy, or short-tempered, or old fashioned; they love you. And remember also, your grandparents felt the same about your parents when they were your age. The love shared with you, is the same love that God shares with all of us. Somewhere in the bible is the thought that *we* love only because *God loves us*. God's love can be likened to electricity. Switch the switch, and God's love flows through us. If *we* switch off, the flow is broken, and that's when things go wrong.

These two mothers met and greeted and shared their joy. Today, we meet, whether here or on Zoom; today we greet each other in God's love; today we share the joy of the prospect of the coming of Jesus into the world at Christmas.

Next weekend, the whole world will share some of that joy. Normal activity will be put to one side. Already the streets in our neighbourhood are slowly being transformed by the flow of electricity as people switch on their decorative lights. People everywhere will share gifts; how many will realise that in doing so they are switching on to celebrate God's greatest gift for them? – the gift of the birth of new life in Christ's resurrection. A gift given in God's great love for them. How many will realise that in switching on to Christmas they are responding unknowingly to the love of God, who is waiting for them to switch on to his love? God is not expecting a return for his love. This expression of love by God is not a bargaining chip for us to love God in return; God sharing his love is not a purchase of our love for Him – this love is a free gift for us to do with as we please,



That is what a gift is; its free, and you can do with it what you wish. The recipient is under no obligation; they are not being bought off. When *we* choose to love God, we are not buying *him* off, either. God is under no obligation to love us in return – it is just that he does love us for what we are, without obligation, without the need for return.

Underneath all the celebrations, the equivalent of Malachi's concerns will continue to bubble away:

weak political leadership,  
destructive religious argument,  
fear of Covid-19, or other health issues,  
questions about how I am to recover from the mess I keep making of my relationships with people,  
or wondering just what life is all about, really.

These challenges in life, and a whole lot more have the propensity to upset us, to keep us awake at night, even to make us depressed.

Mary and Elizabeth would have had their own selection of life's issues themselves, but all

could be put aside in the joy of coming together to celebrate new life. Mary sings “My soul magnifies the Lord”.

In our response to the thinking this morning we will sing a modern version of Mary’s song: “Tell out my Soul.”

As we sing, let us share in Mary’s vision. Let us rejoice in God, who is our Saviour; let us thank God that he is interested in each of us; let us determine to pray Night and Day; let us share with God in the work of the Gospel; let us proclaim the good news to everyone we know.

My Soul Magnifies the Lord.

This Advent Season, I am sure your Soul does, too.