



Pressezentrum

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Veranstaltung:	Bibelarbeit
Zeit, Ort:	Do. 09.30 – 10.30, Halle 18, Messe Berlin, Charlottenburg (594 E1)
Referent/in:	Erzbischof Thabo Makgoba, Primas Anglikanische Kirche in Südafrika, Kapstadt/ Südafrika

Text: Luke 1:39-56 – Mary and Elizabeth meet

One of the reasons that my predecessor, Archbishop Emeritus Desmond Tutu, who won the Nobel Peace Prize for his campaign against apartheid, became so well known internationally was his sense of humour. He likes to make church fun, and one of the ways in which he began a sermon was to tell a funny story – often as a way of giving serious people from the West, perhaps people such as yourselves, permission to laugh in church.

So I will begin this Bible study by telling you one of the famous Tutu stories. In this one, he tells us what it must have been like for a young girl, living in the Middle East 2000 years ago, to have encountered the Archangel Gabriel. The story goes like this:

Mary, a teenager living in a small village, is sitting at home, quietly minding her own business, when there is a knock at the door.

"Knock, knock!"

Mary says: **"Who's there?"**

The person outside says: **"Mary, it's the Archangel Gabriel!"**

"Oh! Come in!"

"Hello Mary!"

"Hello!"

"Mary, God would like you to be the mother of his son."

Mary is shocked. She says:

"What? Me!! In this village you can't even scratch yourself without everybody knowing about it! You want me to be an unmarried mother? I'm a decent girl, you know. Sorry, try next door."

As Archbishop Tutu says, if Mary had said that, the world would really have been in trouble. Fortunately, wonderfully, she actually said, as the Bible tells us:

"Behold the handmaid of the Lord; be it unto me according to thy word," and the universe breathed a cosmic sigh of relief, because she made it possible for the Saviour of the world to be born.

Introduction

My friends, I bring you greetings from our mutual ecumenical friends, including the Lutheran and Reformed churches in South Africa. I am so excited to be here to celebrate this extraordinary time in the Church's life and our lives.

The Reformation was in a sense the new discovery of the Gospel, a focus on the incarnate Christ, and a move away from self-centredness to truly seeking God's presence in our lives. Put differently, through the Reformation, we were enabled to ask with confidence, who is my neighbour, and how do I love my neighbour as myself, as I would the Lord my God, with my whole heart, mind and soul?

The general Kirchentag theme of "You see me", taken from Genesis 16:13, wherein Hagar encounters God and the birth of Ishmael, captures the vision of the intention of the celebrations of this 500th anniversary of the Reformation; a celebration of a God who burst into the human condition and calls us back to a journey home; a God who loves us, warts and all, who makes us able to love because He first loved us. He liberates us and, although we don't deserve it, he makes us right with him and our neighbours, as well as with our environment.

Friends, how extraordinary and wonderful it was that God chose a humble peasant, an unmarried girl, unknown to anybody whom the world believed important, to bear his Son.

To show how extraordinary God's intervention was, let us imagine how it might have happened if it had happened in today's world.

Today, Mary would perhaps have been a teenage refugee, fleeing war in Syria, being given sanctuary in Germany, just as Mary and Joseph found sanctuary 2000 years ago. Then, an innkeeper gave them a stable for sanctuary; now, maybe temporary refugee accommodation can be seen as the current-day stable.

The passage in Luke chosen for this Bible study, called the *Magnificat*, or *Song of Mary*, is about this radical loving, and the reversal of status, power structures and values. It courageously announces the presence of God as life-transforming, and turning the order of the day upside down. The Magnificat is a song of courage and hope.

At the opening of this song, men are made to 'shut up'. The Angel Gabriel took Zacharias' voice away (he silenced the man) and focuses on the dialogue between two women (Mary and Elizabeth) to introduce the Good News. The Lucan God sees and recognizes the important role of women in his salvation history.

The women, for their part, begin on a note of praise and thanksgiving, in effect saying: Thank you God for your transforming and liberating power, your true freedom, thank you for your great mercy. You make the impossible possible. You hear the pain of women. You are renewing the face of the earth, sensitive and aware of the pain and despair of the displaced, the marginalised and the downtrodden.

Let us explore this song together.

You may know that in South Africa we sing. We sing in church of course. But we sing at funerals and weddings. We sing at political rallies. We sing at meetings of a trade union. We sing at football matches. Through the years of the struggle against apartheid we sang to voice our pain and express our hope. You may even know some of the more famous songs: *Senzeni na*, for example, which means: "What have we done?" Many of the songs we sing are made up, on the spur of the moment to address a particular situation, though of course each "new" song borrows from the repertoire in common use. For example, nowadays we sing in democratic South for ethical leadership.

You may wish to refer to your own song from your own locality. I am telling you about our songs because I imagine Mary, in this respect, might have been a bit like a South African. In response to the blessing she receives from Elizabeth, she sings. She sings the Magnificat – a song that mirrors a song she probably already knew well: The song of Hannah from 1 Samuel.

Please look at these two songs side by side and you will see how Luke has used Hannah's song as a foundation for Mary's:

Hannah's song and Mary's Magnificat:

Hannah (1 Samuel 2)

- v. 1: My heart exalts in the Lord; I rejoice in thy salvation.
- v. 2: There is none holy like the Lord.
- v. 4: The bows of the mighty are broken but the feeble gird on strength.
- v. 5: Those who were full have hired themselves out for bread, but those who were hungry have ceased to hunger.

Mary (Luke 1)

- v. 46f.: My soul magnifies the Lord; my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour.
- v. 49: Holy is his name.
- v. 52: He has put down the mighty from their thrones, and exalted those of low degree.
- v. 53: He has filled the hungry with good things, and the rich he has sent away empty.

The difference between Hannah and Mary is this: Hannah sings because God has finally, after many years, granted her the birth of a son. Mary, on the other hand, is a young, unmarried girl. This difference led some later

translators of the Bible to put the Magnificat into the mouth of Elizabeth, who also conceived in old age. But the Greek version of the text clearly has Mary sing the song.

Before expanding further, let me paint in broad strokes the context of Luke's Gospel. The Lucan God intervenes decisively in a context of poverty and injustice. Through Jesus, the son of Mary, God comes for all humankind. This "cosmic event" signals, as the overall theme of the Kirchentag suggests, that God does SEE all of us – that God is a universal God, not only one for Germans, Spaniards, Americans or Zulus, but God is our God, the God of all of us – but especially of the marginalised, captives, the poor, the exiled, immigrants and refugees. In Jesus, God fulfils the promised salvation and thereby joins in our song, or rather is the composer of our song. Let us follow this theme of song in the scriptures:

The Hebrew Scriptures include several "songs," those of Moses (Ex 15:1–18), Miriam (Ex 15:19–21), Deborah (Judges 5:1–31), and Hannah (1 Sam 2:1–10). Luke adds four of his own – Zechariah (1:67–79), Simeon (2:28–32), Mary (1:46–55), and that of "a multitude of the heavenly host" at Jesus' birth (2:13). Many scholars, for example Raymond Brown, think that Luke used one or more sources and adapted them for his own use. Brown believes that Luke's songs, including this song of Mary, come from a kind of hymnal dating back to the period 200 BCE to 100 CE, where almost every line is derived from the earlier poetry of Israel – the psalms, the Prophets and hymns in the Pentateuch and Historical Books.

Singing can be an act of resistance. Think of the Spirituals sung by the slaves of the American South. Think of your own country's singers in Leipzig in 1989 who gathered at St Nikolai each Monday night to protest against the Berlin Wall. Too often we over-spiritualise Mary's song but if we had not encountered it before and read it instead as the song of a Palestinian teenager today, just think how political it would sound:

He has scattered the proud (v51)

He has brought down the powerful (v52)

He has filled the hungry ... and sent the rich away empty (v53)

Mary's song is a protest song. I am reminded that music and poetry and art and drama are part of our resistance tradition. I will come back to this point when I consider Mary (and Elizabeth) as prophets. There is a beautiful modern version of Mary's song by Rory Cooney which captures the radical protest nature of the song. Let's take a minute to read it.

1. My soul cries out with a joyful shout
that the God of my heart is great,
And my spirit sings of the wondrous things
that you bring to the ones who wait.
You fixed your sight on your servant's plight,
and my weakness you did not spurn,
So from east to west shall my name be blest.
Could the world be about to turn?
Refrain
My heart shall sing of the day you bring.
Let the fires of your justice burn.
Wipe away all tears, for the dawn draws near,
and the world is about to turn!
2. Though I am small, my God, my all,
you work great things in me,
And your mercy will last from the depths of the past
to the end of the age to be.
Your very name puts the proud to shame,
and to those who would for you yearn,
You will show your might, put the strong to flight,
for the world is about to turn.
3. From the halls of power to the fortress tower,
not a stone will be left on stone.
Let the king beware for your justice tears
ev'ry tyrant from his throne.
The hungry poor shall weep no more,
for the food they can never earn;
There are tables spread, ev'ry mouth be fed,
for the world is about to turn.
4. Though the nations rage from age to age,
we remember who holds us fast:
God's mercy must deliver us

from the conqueror's crushing grasp.
This saving word that our forebears heard
is the promise which holds us bound,
'Til the spear and rod can be crushed by God,
who is turning the world around.

Connections of the Hebrew Scriptures with other aspects of Luke:

Luke does not just draw on 1 Samuel in crafting his song of Mary. He is alert to other parallels in the Hebrew Scriptures and there are also interesting links within the gospel itself.

Consider the story of Rebekah's children, Esau and Jacob. We read in Genesis 25:22 of the struggles between the twins in Rebekah's womb. And we know that there was a struggle for supremacy between the twins for most of their lives.

You may ask why I even connect these two stories. Luke uses the same word to describe the baby John's leap for joy in Elizabeth's womb as the Septuagint translation of Genesis 25:22 – usually translated in English as "struggled." Luke's use of the word is unique in the New Testament. I am sure there is an intended connection here. In Luke 1 there are two cousins who *never* struggle for supremacy. Although John is the older of the two, he declares he is not worthy to untie Jesus' sandals (Luke 3:16). So Luke turns the story from Genesis upside down in illustrating the possibility of a non-competitive fraternal relationship.

We might also like to compare Mary's song with Jesus' Nazareth sermon in Luke 4:18–19. Both proclaim God's concern for the poor and vulnerable.

Elizabeth's prophetic greeting of Mary (in verse 42) is also interesting. "Blessed are you ..." she proclaims. The Greek word for blessed – *makarios* – is the same word Luke uses in 11:27 (a scene that does not appear in any other gospel) when someone in the crowd shouts "Blessed is the womb that bore you ..." And Jesus' response in 11:28 ("Blessed are those who hear the word of God and keep it") echoes Deuteronomy 28:4 "Blessed shall be the fruit of your womb ..." for those who are obedient to God.

Elizabeth, after blessing Mary's motherhood, goes on to repeat her blessing in verse 45. But this time she blesses Mary for having heard the word and obeyed. There is no doubt that Luke is deliberately drawing a parallel with Deuteronomy 28.

Some closer textual observations:

Although this is such a familiar text, there are some interesting issues which emerge on closer examination of the text, for example:

1. Verse 39 is usually translated something like this: In those days Mary set out for a Judean town ... However, the Greek literally reads: *And rising up Mary, in those days went ...* It is possible to read "rising up" not as a description of Mary's action but as an adjective: "rising up Mary". And what is really interesting is that Luke uses the word *anastasa* (rising up) to describe Jesus' resurrection (24:46) and the sudden rising of the Emmaus road disciples who rose up and returned immediately to Jerusalem after their eyes had been opened. (24:33). Is there a hint here that Mary, having acceded to the angel's invitation to bear the child, is raised up to new life by God?

2. As I have already noted, in v.41 and v.44 we read that Elizabeth's child "leaped" in her womb. The word for "leap" (*skirteo*) is used only in Luke. Twice it is used in reference to John's "leaping" in the womb and once in reference to Luke's beatitude about persecution. "Rejoice in that day and leap for joy, for surely your reward is great in heaven" (6:23). As I noted above, the same word is used in the Septuagint translation of Genesis 25:22 about the twins struggling together in Rebekah's womb.

3. In English Mary's song always begins "My **soul** magnifies ..." The soul is far too often seen as a disembodied dimension of a person. John Petty suggests a much better translation would be "My life proclaims ..." or "The essence of my being proclaims ..."

Women as prophets:

It is extremely rare to find a Biblical scene that portrays only women. There are some exceptions to that rule, as Richard Bauckham points out, citing scenes from the Old Testament:

1. The daughters of Lot discuss getting their father drunk so they can lie with him and get pregnant (Gen 19:32,34).
2. Leah gives Rachel mandrakes so she can have a night with Jacob (Gen 30:14–15).
3. Moses' sister negotiates with Pharaoh's daughter to find a nurse for the baby in the basket and brings Moses' mother to fill the position (Ex 2:1–10).

4. The mother of Sisera (the Canaanite leader killed by Jael) consults with her ladies-in-waiting as to why he isn't home yet (because he is lying dead in Jael's tent, a nail pounded through his temple) (Judges 5:28–30).
5. Peninnah torments Hannah for her inability to conceive a child (1 Sam 1:1–8).
6. Ruth and Naomi in the Book of Ruth: Ruth refuses to leave Naomi. The two travel from Moab to Judah and amicably work out the details of their future in a new land.
7. A slave girl suggests to Naaman's wife that he should go to the prophet in Samaria (Elisha) (2 Kgs 5:2–3).

It is the exceptional nature of these scenes that make all the more striking the fact that Luke begins and ends his story of Jesus with two women – the visit of Mary to Elizabeth and the visit of the women to the tomb (chapter 24). We might also notice that in the list Bauckham compiles, more often than not, the situations described contain portrayals of women which are less than edifying: rivalry, drunken incest in a cave, the bartering of husbands in a field, and murder in a tent.

Yet the meeting of Elizabeth and Mary described in our reading from Luke's Gospel contains not a hint of rivalry; only mutual joy. To crown the exceptional nature of this scene, the two women are presented as prophets. Elizabeth speaks with the power and gifting of the Holy Spirit (v.41,42). She also recognises "My Lord" (v.43). Mary's song is a classic instance of the articulation of God's special concern for the downtrodden, the poor and the hungry.

We might consider the fact that Luke opens his narrative with Zechariah falling silent and Elizabeth (and Mary) moving to centre stage. There is no doubt that, just like Mary's song, the entire scene subverts the normal structures of power. Women who were supposed to be silent, who often go unnamed or unnoticed, are the ones who prophetically reveal God's upside down world.

Conclusion:

There is so much more one could say about this rich text, but I want to end, not with more words, or even a song, but a picture. It is painted by an artist who simply calls herself "Anna" and it appears on her blog. In this image the women are not demure little creatures, eyes downcast, but full of energy, dancing in delight. For me, it captures Elizabeth's "loud cry" (v.42) and Mary's powerful song and the sheer delight of the good news.

Just as Mary celebrated the Good News, in South Africa I have watched young women and men who have the courage to sing through their tears as they carry their burdens and plead for access to education, to sanitation and for dignity and opportunity. I invite you too to learn to know their song and melody.

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