

15th December 2019

Preacher: Jen Smith

Hymns: **178** **Long ago, prophets knew**
 187 **The angel Gabriel from heaven came**
 186 **Tell out, my soul, the greatness of the Lord!**
 188 **There's a light upon the mountains**

Readings: **Isaiah 35:1-10**
 Matthew 11:2-11

“Magnificent Soul”

Holy God, break your word as bread for the feeding of our souls. And may the words of my lips and the meditation of all our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord our strength and our Redeemer. Amen.

Silence

Mary: Magnificent Soul

Jesus and John the Baptist, sons of interesting mothers, Mary and Elizabeth.

Let's take a step back from their interaction as adults, before John's hope-filled question from his prison cell – 'are you the one who is to come?'

This question, with which I identify this week. With which all of us might identify. Waiting. Waiting through a long night for election results, or working through a long day of tasks and people. Moving through our lives, busy, questing – but a question at the centre, a question which will not go away.

A question to God, from each of our souls: 'are you the one I am waiting for?' And soon to be followed by other questions: how long will we wait? Where will you be? How will we know? And this question too the same one that echoes from our groaning world: the question asked by the thirsty earth, the desert places where there is no life:

'Are you the promised messiah, the one who will bring streams of water to my parched earth? The one to make the desert bloom?'

This question asked by John echoes in the hope and longing of every refugee, every heartbroken person, ever society fractured by violence, or poverty, or prejudice. 'Are you the one for whom we are waiting?'

This may be our question – but let's take a step back, behind that question asked by John of Jesus, grown men the one in prison, the other travelling the towns of their childhood – leave it hanging in the air pregnant.

Because these men have met before. Not to remember, perhaps, but an echo of a dream of a memory – sons of unconventional mothers.

Let's go back to Mary, pregnant – and unmarried. Mary in Luke 1. And she goes to visit her relative Elizabeth, herself also pregnant though being far too old to be pregnant - married to the priest Zechariah, who has had some trouble with his voice after arguing with the angel Gabriel – it's a good story, and will make you smile – Luke 1.

³⁹ In those days, (we are told) Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country, ⁴⁰ where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. ⁴¹ When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit ⁴² and exclaimed with a loud cry, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. ⁴³ And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me? ⁴⁴ For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leaped for joy. ⁴⁵ And blessed is she who believed that there would be^[a] a fulfilment of what was spoken to her by the Lord."

And as the baby John leaps in Elizabeth's womb, Mary responds with the song we read together, the song that begins 'My soul magnifies the Lord.'

The song that begins with the love of God, and ends with God's love for the world – scattering the proud, feeding the hungry. Keeping the promise.

Above all, this is a song of hope! And not hope on a good day, but hope on a bad day – hope when life looks hard. And this song, the nature of the hope that is in it, is distinctive for its utter lack of denial – it is profoundly realistic – it knows the power of the proud, and the durability of hunger and poverty. And yet, it echoes the sensibility of Isaiah, that flowers will bloom in desert places, that God is coming.

And it is important too that it is a song sung by Mary - who is not a queen or a noblewoman, not an esteemed commentator or pundit, but one young woman in one backwater of a town in a corner of an Empire. Pregnant, uncertain future, travelling.

Today we are about preparing ourselves for Christmas, the moment when the adult man John's question 'are you the one for whom we are waiting?' will be answered in the most bewildering way.

Remember, the point about Mary and her 'magnificent' soul is that this is how God comes into the world. No longer to be separated from it, but joined with us.

And like John, we are preparing for the coming of the Holy Spirit to call our lives to be part of God's mystery. Sometimes this is almost like seeing something from the corner of our eye, the echo of a memory, of recognition – the thing that makes our heart leap, our breath catch, when we come to it.

Hang on, do Methodists 'do' Mary? We spend more time with Susanna Wesley, when it comes to it. We know Mary has inspired music, inspired devotion – but is it

a healthy thing? And we know, she has been used as the example of a perfect woman: submissive meek and mild, to encourage the rest of us, men and women alike, to be a little less noisy or make a little less trouble than we might otherwise?

John Wesley preached a sermon called 'the Almost Christian,' in which he spoke of the almost Christian as one who does all good things in sincerity, and does nothing which is forbidden – the kind of person we'd love to have in church - the person who serves her neighbour, and clothes the naked, comes every Sunday and uses the means of grace – you remember those – prayer, scripture, the Lord's supper, fasting, fellowship – and does all in sincerity, but somehow is not quite there?

In Wesley's words, 'The great question of all, then, still remains. Is the love of God shed abroad in your heart? Can you cry out, "My God, and my All"? Do you desire nothing but him? Are you happy in God? Is he your glory, your delight, your crown of rejoicing? And is this commandment written in your heart, "That he who loveth God love his brother also"? Do you then love your neighbour as yourself? Do you love every man, even your enemies, even the enemies of God, as your own soul? as Christ loved you?

I do not take a binary approach to Wesley's work, expecting that we are either the almost, or the altogether Christian – but that we live in a creative tension between the two, moved by grace and living as real people gently, ever so gently sanctified and sanctifying.

And yet, Wesley's questions convict me, in an election week. Is the love of God shed abroad in my heart? In a week when I have been in the USA helping to grieve an uncle of mine who has died too young, among people trying to think how to knit together a society that is looking more and more broken?

I want to suggest Mary as the antidote to Wesley's 'almost' Christian. If we follow her example, we will not just be telling stories about Jesus to encourage people to be good and trying to be good ourselves, but bearing Jesus alive into this world.

We are remembering Mary and Elizabeth, and singing Mary's song to help us make our own yes to God. Not to repeat hers, nor John Wesley's himself, God bless him. But our own yes. To be ready, to have our lives become a womb in which God grows. Our own lives, our inauspicious lives, on the bad days and the grey days and the uninspired days when angels feel very far away indeed. Chance would be a fine thing, to get to argue with one.

Because the promise is not 'flowers will continue to bloom where they already do,' but 'flowers will bloom in the desert.

Not, 'streams of water in the flowing rivers and beautiful picturesque places already,' but 'streams of water in the parched earth.'

The promise is not 'prosperity in the countries that are already prosperous, education for those who already have access, jobs and healthcare for the ones already in the system – but 'new life coming in places you have not expected it.' Even in our hearts, even in this place. Even, from Bethlehem and a manger.

Mary's magnificent song, and yours – because you are already singing it - will drive us out of church – into new places, with those on the margins – and with the parts of ourselves that we keep to the margins. The YES is about putting on the strength of God and letting God take us! Not as robots. As collaborators – as the bearers of wisdom – we may be ill – we may have heavy burdens – our yes is still our yes.

Remember Luke also wrote Acts of the Apostles, and Mary is still a part of the story, still working among the disciples of the early church. Mary in the Acts of the Apostles appears as a mature and senior disciple in the early communities – Acts 2.12-14, before Pentecost. Not just for Christmas, then. And not just a meek and mild teenager.

Mary grew up. And grown up, hurt more than once, disappointed more than once, she was still working, still walking. This to me gives her song more credibility. It has the integrity of one who is not in the first flush of love, but has weathered the storms and is still in love.

And that is one reason Magnificat, Mary's song, is part of evening prayer every night in BCP, Catholic and Anglican tradition, the evening prayers John Wesley would have said himself - and our own – it is about the enduring results of our 'yes' to God – it is about mission, in other words.

Which brings us back to where we started, with the two grown sons of Mary and Elizabeth, Jesus and John. And John's question to Jesus from the prison cell. 'Are you the one for whom we are waiting?'

Jesus didn't answer directly. Instead he said 'go and tell John what you are seeing.' Deeds not words. The lame walk, the blind see, the deaf hear, and the poor have good news brought to them.

Be a part of what is happening, in other words. Testify to it, give yourself again to hope. Never to retreat from the hardness of life, or the questions of life. But gently, to visit one another and encourage one another in the smallest steps, the largest risks.

Mary, magnificent soul. Mary, antidote to John Wesley's almost Christian. Walk with confidence this week friends, and let the echo of her song sound in the corners of your speech. In the melody of your work, the choices you make. For the promise is made to our ancestors, to Abraham and his children and ours, for ever.