

Christian Aid sermon notes for Advent and Christmas

Mary's Magnificat

Luke 1:46-55

Be of good cheer!

However you experience Advent and Christmas, we offer an invitation, not to be forced into a false cheerfulness, but to stop and listen to a song – the Magnificat. To let its words of joy and justice set a different rhythm and tune for this season, so often drowned out by a cacophony of commercialism.

It's the song of a young woman first heard by an older woman, but who has been heard and understood by 'all those whose dreams and yearnings are given voice in its words'.¹ It's a song so subversive and radical it was banned in Guatemala for fear it might inspire the oppressed people to riot.² 'A more revolutionary tune could not be found in world literature or music!'³

Mary's song, or the Magnificat, is a radical and revolutionary song of joy and justice, an anthem for women and other oppressed groups seeking to uproot the structures and systems that keep them on the margins of society and denied a full and free life.

Joy and justice

Mary sings for the proud to be scattered, the powerful to be brought down from their thrones, the rich to be sent away empty. It is a song that rails against inequality, but 'is not the song of a victim but one that proclaims liberation with tough authority'.⁴

In this song we find faith and hope that the present inequality faced by women across the world will be redressed. No longer will women be 4% more likely to live in extreme poverty than men. No longer will women in developing countries have no say over their own healthcare. One in three women will no longer experience gender-based violence in their lifetime. 830 women will no longer die everyday from preventable causes related to pregnancy or childbirth around the world.

In listening to Mary's song, we hear the prophetic joy of believing how things can be. Like Hannah in the Old Testament (1 Samuel 1:11 and 2:1-10), Mary believes in that day when the lowly will be lifted up and the hungry will be filled with good things. She sings with women like Ranjita in India and Bibi in Afghanistan, believing and working for that day when no woman is treated as a second-class citizen.

The lowly are lifted up

As a Dalit – from the word 'dal' meaning to break or crush – Ranjita has lived under the oppression of the caste system all her life. She was forced to work as a manual scavenger when she was just nine years old. This degrading job required her to remove human excrement with her hands. She has been treated as the lowest of the low, as she explains: 'They would drop the bread on the plate I carry, they didn't even hand it to me. They treated us worse than animals.'

Ranjita was determined to find a new life for herself. Christian Aid's partner ARUN runs a self-help community that enables women like Ranjita to come together and find an alternative and fulfilling means of earning a living. By learning about her rights, Ranjita applied for and got the government compensation grant, which helped her to set up her own tailoring business. Ranjita can now afford to rent a room for her family to live in, rather than living in the slums.



Ranjita makes clothes with her new sewing machine.

‘Before, people used to shout at us and throw things at us... Now, those same people are coming to us to stitch their clothes,’ says Sumid, Ranjita’s colleague. The lowly truly are being lifted up – praise God!

He has filled the hungry with good things

Bibi has long lived under the shadow of war in Afghanistan. ‘Faced with war and drought, there was nothing to eat,’ she says. ‘We were forced to leave home and we lost everything.’ She is widowed and lives with her two children in a camp.

Despite Bibi’s severe hardship and hunger, she is determined that her children will prosper. Echoing the hope of Mary, she says: ‘I want a bright future for my children, I want them to be educated.’

Our partner, RAADA, aims to enable women like Bibi to work independently and empower themselves, socially and economically. The group has initiated a number of different, life-changing programmes, such as raising awareness of women’s basic rights, creating women-led businesses, and introducing new training for women seeking to earn a livelihood.

RAADA is helping Afghan women like Bibi to live with dignity, ensuring the hungry are filled with good things.

Solidarity of singing

It’s when Mary and Elizabeth come together that Mary bursts into song – she is finally with someone who will believe her incredible story. It is in the coming together of women in India, Afghanistan, Kenya and Bangladesh, that allows for life-changing, hopeful plans to bear fruit.

Coming together to sing is now a well-known means of improving mental health.⁵ Singing has also long been used to galvanise solidarity around issues of injustice. *We Shall Overcome* became an anthem for the 1960s civil rights movement. The Afro-American spirituals emboldened the 19th century abolition movement. And the songs of

protest of the anti-apartheid movement – such as *Freedom Is Coming* – stir our hearts to hope.

At a time of year when our streets are filled with merry music, we are not only invited to listen, but to raise our voices to join in the song of the prophets. ‘In the most difficult situations, when we can see no way forward, prophets are those who help us to reimagine the world, find faith again, and inspire us with the hope to keep on singing.’⁶

Mary’s song offers just such a prophetic vision of how things can be. It sings of the freedom for those bound by the oppression of caste and the inequality imposed by gender. It offers freedom to those of us feeling enslaved by the expectations and demands of Christmas. Freedom is coming!

Christmas is coming

Mary’s song is also one of joy. The joy of anticipating a baby who will bring justice and equality for all. And we get to join in this joy when we give, act and pray to see this justice and equality being realised for women across the world, this Christmas.

We get to share in the joy of women like Ranjita as she watches her youngest child Soniya go to school, the first of Ranjita’s children to be able to do so. And we share in the hope of women like Bibi who is determined to break the cycle of poverty and make sure that her children have the chances that she didn’t have.

In this season when joy can become a cliché, we’re invited to listen to Mary’s song and to enter into a deeper joy. The joy that comes from generous giving and tipping the scales towards justice. Inspired by God’s generous gift to the world this Christmas (John 3:16, James 1:17), and giving with the good cheer of a joyful giver (2 Corinthians 9:7) – may we all be of good cheer this Christmas!

(Suggested song for after sermon: *When Out Of Poverty Is Born*. We’re encouraging churches to sing this on 1 December in a joint moment of shared worship, but it can be sung throughout Advent.)



Bibi and her daughter in Afghanistan.

Songs and prayers

Song:

When out of poverty is born
a dream that will not die
and landless, weary folk find strength
to stand with heads held high,
it's then we learn from those who wait
to greet the promised day:
'The Lord is coming; don't lose heart.
Be blest: prepare the way!'

When people wander far from God,
forget to share their bread,
they find their wealth an empty thing,
their spirits are not fed.
For only just and tender love
the hungry soul will stay.
And so God's prophets echo still:
'Be blest: prepare the way!'

When God took flesh and came to Earth,
the world turned upside down,
and in the strength of woman's faith
the Word of Life was born.
She knew that God would raise the low,
it pleased her to obey.
Rejoice with Mary in the call,
'Be blest: prepare the way!'

Words: Kathy Galloway, provided with permission
Suggested tune: Kingsfold

A prayer of intercession

Leader: Close and Caring Creator,
we pray with hope
for our sisters in Afghanistan
who are feeling afraid,
treated as second-class citizens,
struggling but coming together,
willing and working for a better future.
Loving God, let it come soon!

Leader: Incarnate and Intimate Son,
we pray with longing
for our sisters in India
for an end to the discrimination
and exclusion they face daily.
They know they were made for more,
willing and working for a better future.
Loving God, let it come soon!

Leader: Encouraging and Empowering Spirit,
we pray with joy
for our sisters in Kenya and Bangladesh.
For the support they have been given,
the catalyst they needed
to allow their gifts and talents to flourish,
willing and working for a better future.
Loving God, let it come soon!

Remembering Mary – a poem and prayer

Poem:

We sometimes forget that Mary was a woman.
She appears to us in our imaginations as an icon;
a mannequin with a child but never pregnant.

We sometimes
forget that Mary
had a voice.
We remember
her as silent, on
the back of a
stuffed donkey,
dragged along by
a man-child in a
tea-towel.



We sometimes forget that Mary had ears to hear.
Our Mary knows more about private faith
than the restless politics of her time, her society in
upheaval.

We sometimes forget the end of the beginning:
the terror, the flight, the exile, the aching
uncertainty.

We sometimes forget that Mary had a child.
A crying child, a restless child, a needy child, a
hungry child. A child for all time, a child of our
time.⁷

Prayer:

God, as we remember Mary,
the outspoken mother,
and her vulnerable holy child,
may we also remember the women of
India, Afghanistan, Bangladesh and Kenya,
who also long for freedom from poverty,
for the lowly to be raised up
for the hungry to be filled
for their children to flourish

and for all the causes of their oppression,
the injustice and misuse of power,
to be brought down, scattered and made empty.
May we see in their eyes, as in Mary's,
the spark of resilient hope
and the strength of resistance
and help us join our voice with theirs,
creating a chorus of courageous hope
that cannot be suppressed or ignored.
In your name we pray,
Amen.

A prayer in anticipation

In anticipation of You,
a girl raised her voice,
in courage and praise,
in joy and expectation,
in resistance and struggle.

In anticipation of You,
put flesh on our faith
to put words into action,
to call for equality,
to work for justice.

In anticipation of You,
let the lowly be raised,
the crushed be restored,
the bruised be resilient,
the powerful be restrained.

In anticipation of You,
let us be filled with hope,
to say yes to your will,
to share our gifts and resources,
to work together for a world reborn.

In your name we pray,
Amen.

An Advent blessing

The God of Sarah and Hagar,
the God of Mary who bore the Christ,
and of Simon who carried his cross,
the God in whom there is neither Jew nor Gentile,
bless us this Advent season
with an extravagance of patience, insight, hope
and love,
as we await the birth of our Saviour
in whom all things are held together
and in whom all shall be made new.
Amen.

Copyright © WGRG, c/o Iona Community, Glasgow, Scotland.
Reproduced with permission. wildgoose.scot



¹ Sharon Ringe, https://www.ucc.org/weekly_seeds_song_of_joy_and_justice

² https://www.ucc.org/weekly_seeds_song_of_joy_and_justice

³ Ched Myers <https://radicaldiscipleship.net/2015/12/17/3360/>

⁴ The Women's Bible Commentary, SPCK, p284

⁵ <http://www.ox.ac.uk/research/choir-singing-improves-health-happiness-%E2%80%93-and-perfect-icebreaker>

⁶ Christian Aid, Song of the Prophets, p4

⁷ Leanne Clelland, Christian Aid Scotland