

Sermon preached at St. James's Piccadilly London

The Revd Ivan Khovacs / 14 August 2016

Galatians 4.4-7 Luke 1.46-55

The Lord was in a den with a pack of wolves.

"You really are so intelligent," the Lord said, "and have such glorious eyes. Why do you think you're hounded so? It's like they want to exterminate you, it's awful."

"Well, sometimes it's the calves and the cows," the wolves said.

"Oh those maddening cows," the Lord said. "I have a suggestion. What if I caused you not to have a taste for them anymore?"

"It wouldn't matter. Then it would be the deer or the elk. Have you seen the bumper stickers on the hunters' trucks—did a wolf get your elk?"

"I guess I missed that," the Lord said.

"Sentiment is very much against us down here," the wolves said.

"I'm so awfully sorry," the Lord said.

"Thank you for inviting us to participate in your plan anyway," the wolves said politely.

The Lord did not want to appear addled, but what was the plan his sons were referring to exactly?¹

This is story # 93 from Joy Williams's recent book *99 Stories of God*. It's a collection of short parables that, taken together, paint a picture of bafflements about God, mostly couched with some sense of irony, a large pinch of self-deprecating theology, and ultimately humour.

Theologians always insist that, in the end, theology is simply talking about God. And Joyce Williams's stories make the point that—at it's best—theology is simply a way of helping us hear rumours of God.

I think this raises some interesting questions for us—today on this Feast of the Blessed Virgin Mary: What if we knew something of Mary's theology? Christian traditions—and specially the Catholic and Orthodox churches—have complex teaching about Mary.

But what if Mary in the Bible had more to say to us? What kind of rumours of God would she speak to us? Mary stays close to Jesus throughout his life, she's there from birth to crucifixion—and so is rightfully central in Christianity. But considering this, we do hear remarkably little from her in the Gospels.

And I wonder if this silence has had the effect of making Mary a convenient canvas on which the Church has historically painted a sometimes contrived picture of women, of motherhood, of the value of virginity, and so on— that has little to do with the Mary the Mother of Jesus in the Gospels.

Now, how is this for rumours of God:

"God is my strong rock
in whom I trust...
To all who are weak,
she shows compassion,
and those who are downtrodden she causes to rise.
But she will confound the arrogant at the height of their power,
and the oppressor
she will throw to the ground;
the strategies of the hard-hearted she will utterly confute.
God pities the fallen, ...
she challenges the mighty,
and I desire her

¹ Excerpted from 'Ninety-nine Stories of God' in *The Paris Review*, accessed on <http://www.theparisreview.org/blog/2013/06/07/3-stories-of-god-79-80-and-93/>.

with my whole heart.”

These are the words of the feminist theologian Janet Morley. It is her paraphrase Morley rehearses central themes we find in the Magnificat—or Mary’s Song—our text from today’s Gospel.

What I find most interesting in Janet Morley’s feminist re-working of the Magnificat is her attempt to imagine Mary, the mother of Jesus, with a voice that is uniquely hers. It is an exercise in theological imagining, in constructing a model of God that deliberately runs against traditional and arguably paternalistic language of God. In the end, Janet Morley perceives God who is uniquely addressed to her as a woman, and is not one simply ascribed to her by the Gospel writer.

But this still doesn’t quite open up to us Mary’s theological mind. And that could well be because, in the Gospels, by my count, Mary speaks only four times. There’s the Annunciation, the words of the Magnificat; the time when Jesus as a child is found debating in the temple with the teachers of the law; and at the wedding at Cana—where Jesus turns water into wine.

Let’s stop there for a moment. What if we had some insight into what brings Mary to say to the wine servants, “The wine has run out? Have a word with my son: he’ll know just what to do!” You would think that Mary is simply being a proud mother who wants to show off her son to the other wedding guests. But—theologically—is there anything else going on? Mary’s intervention, you remember, takes Jesus by surprise. He’s not quite ready to be outed to the world as the Son of God. And so Jesus says, “Woman, what is this to do with us?”

In the Gospel story, Mary remains silent. There’s not even an “I told you so…” when the wine Jesus produces turns out to be the finest of the evening.

But let’s get one thing out in the open—we may as well say it: church teaching about Mary is a point of conflict between Protestant and Catholic Christians—and rarely get very far in conversations about Mary. But I think all Christians can agree that if we allow Mary to speak for herself things might be different.

But isn’t this exactly what we have in the Luke’s rendition of the Magnificat? We have Mary’s voice, and that means we have her theology. It’s true, Luke’s Gospel plays back for us this theology in words already shaped by the early Christians into a hymn. But that simply says that Mary’s theology is valued by the early Christians, and it is all the more reason to be astonished by a simple observation:

It is absolutely radical that the Magnificat places Mary exactly within the biblical tradition of God’s prophets. During Advent, we always speak of John the Baptist as the last of the Old Testament prophets because he announces the coming of Jesus and with him God’s salvation for the world.

But in the Magnificat we have Mary’s discerning reading of the signs of the times that sees the overturning of self-serving power in the interest of justice, and specially on behalf of the suffering poor. These central images in Mary’s Song follow in the pattern set by the OT prophets who preached justice as the uncompromising sign of God’s transforming action in the world. In other words, the voice of the biblical prophets calling God’s faithful to justice resonates for the church in Mary’s own voice!!

And so in the Anglican daily service of evening prayer, we allow ourselves to hear rumours of God in the theology of a young woman who feels personally addressed by God, who is touched by his Spirit, and who therefore imagines a world transformed so that the powerful are humbled, the lowly are lifted up, and the hungry are filled with good things. And we hear all this as tangible evidence of God’s merciful transformation of our world.

“My soul doth magnify the Lord: and my spirit hath rejoiced in God my Saviour. He hath shewed strength with his arm: he hath scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts. He hath put down the mighty from their seat: and hath exalted the humble and meek. He hath filled the hungry with good things: and

the rich he hath sent empty away.”

This is where all Christians, across traditions and denominations, have an equal share in Mary’s theology: Mary is in the end one of us and ultimately embodies the Church’s personal address from God: Mary’s Yes to God is our own calling to the Son of God who comes to us in weakness, homeless, and so completely dependent and is even now making his home in the womb which is the Church: the church everywhere, and this church of where prayers are formed and said, sometimes for the first time. Where faith is shaped, gestated and nourished. Where the Sacrament binds us as one.

Where even now Christ asks for our Yes, to be born anew and in our midst—and to come alive, as we go out from this place—in our tangible acts of charity, mercy, humility, justice—in actions that plant rumours of God in the lives of others, and that nourish the faith at the heart of Christians everywhere.

A faith that says that In Mary’s Song, we hear rumours of God. And in Jesus Christ, we perceive that rumour of God, and we live something of God’s unquenchable fire. And that this makes all the difference. Amen.

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