



there be explosives here

Be brave. The end is in sight. We are soon to touchdown at Christmas – drones of various sorts notwithstanding – and, if we are lucky, might find time to rest and ponder and reflect on the birth of Christ and this giddy adventure we call life.

I realise that will not be easy for everyone, especially if you have families and friends to entertain or see, or demons to flee, but do your best, for it is important.

There is little credit in complaining about the busy-ness of the season if we don't make an effort to create opportunities for interior solitude and contemplation. And as some of you have discovered, detachment and contemplation are just as possible when busy and doing things as when cloistered away or walking the hills. It's a matter of approach.

Today, on the fourth and final Sunday of Advent, we are given a remarkable present by Gospel writer Luke: it at first appears to be something gentle, even only decorative, but turns out to be the bee's knees, something exciting and unexpected; a present we are really chuffed to have got. We'll do the unwrapping in a moment or two. First, I'd like us to consider today's principal character.

I have discovered over the years that the figure of Mary, mother of Jesus, is not one to play fast and loose with. She provokes extremes in certain parts of the church. Those of you nurtured in the Roman Catholic or Orthodox Church will know about this divide, as will those from more extreme protestant backgrounds. Parts of the church appear to go well beyond honouring the figure of Mary, to almost worshiping her;

others view her veneration as idolatry and assign her a merely functional walk-on part.

Which brings to mind the figure of Beattie. Maureen Lipman's Jewish granny starred in many British Telecom TV commercials in the 1990s. In one of them, having been told by her grandson Anthony that he had failed most of his exams - passing only pottery and sociology, Beattie cries: "He gets an *ology* and he says he's failed... my boy, you get an *ology* you're a scientist!".

An 'ology' certainly seems to hint at scientific seriousness. The church cornered the market in *theology*, and so it won't surprise you that a branch of theology grew up around the (Blessed Virgin) Mary, called *Mariology*.

This apparently ordinary faithful servant of God (who, without doubt, plays a crucial role in the Christian story) has been elevated to 'Queen of Heaven', 'The Madonna' and 'The Immaculate Mother of God'. And you may have heard of the numerous appearances she is said to have made: from Fatima to the Philippines, New York to Yugoslavia and Knock in Ireland. Always at these appearances there are, it is said, "miracles", and often "warnings" to the world of the approaching judgment unless we change our ways.

Mary, others might say, has made other appearances, of a more measurable and unintended kind. In (and on) for example, attitudes to women and to women's self-perception. In (and on) for example the corrosive attitude we call misogyny. In (and on) for example the apparent tendency, evident in certain attitudes, to regard women

as either virgin or whore, an either/or which leaves little if any room for our sisters *as human persons* displaying the contradictions and variety which to any observer are so much of the reality and quite possibly glory of humankind.

So, it must be right to sympathise with this young woman who was thrown into the limelight of history, for her humanity has been blurred rather badly by the accretion of dogma and the projection of psychic needs and impulses – things religion is spectacularly good at generating. I can't be the only one to wonder how an event (the birth of Jesus) which is concerned with honouring our humanity becomes a vehicle to only blur and sentimentalise it.

Perhaps all that can be said is a variant on the famous injunction from property law 'let the buyer beware': let the *believer* beware. Critical facilities should never be left at the church door. Either on the way in or the way out.

The story of Mary is the story of her saying 'yes' to God. That is as good a summary of the Christian life as you could want for. It does not require elaboration (though that does not stop us from doing so, as much of the history of Christian conflict and schism shows). But it does lead us into interesting places: to say a 'yes' to God will inescapably mean a 'no' to something else; that 'yes' comes with consequences. And we get a steer on these from this morning's Gospel from Luke and this particular passage which is known by the Latin *Magnificat*.

It can at first seem like the present we think we know and could quite do with: something comfortable like slippers maybe, or bathroom smelly stuff. Yet, it turns out to be something far more electric. The compliant young woman submitting to God's will is not quite the full picture.

There are explosives here. Let me draw your attention to some seditious, revolutionary

even, sentiments hidden in this cosy text, enough to make all right-minded citizens and many a Religious Person recoil in terror.

Luke attributes these words to Mary when she visits her cousin Elizabeth. In the narrative, after Mary greets Elizabeth, who is pregnant with the future John the Baptist, the child moves within Elizabeth's womb. When Elizabeth praises Mary for her faith, Mary sings what is now known as the Magnificat in response.

...."My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour, for he has looked with favour on the lowliness of his servant. Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed; for the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name. His mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation. He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty. He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy, according to the promise he made to our ancestors, to Abraham and to his descendants forever."

Now, how do you want to read this, how do you want to unwrap this particular gift?

Or perhaps rather than read it, you find yourself hearing it sung, in your head: musical settings abound, and anyone familiar with choral evensong will know its song-like rhythms even when recited as prose. What can we read into these words if we slip under the heavy mantle of piety and the coiled complexities of Mariology?

Let's imagine we are explaining it to the proverbial visiting alien who observes human religion as organised escapism from a challenging world. But on second thought, we need no alien; let's simply imagine we are explaining it to any half intelligent modern

day human who makes the same observation. And in giving such an account, we might want to observe that this isn't a poem about how great it is to be pregnant. And it isn't a submissive discourse in praise of an Alpha Male God. Nor was it exclaimed solely as a fine text for future use in Anglican Choral Evensong.

The message here is seditious, up-setting, one of revolt, for it speaks of overturning an established order and bringing about fundamental change. I don't read it as saying that we shall change places: that the rich will become the poor and the poor become the rich. That would not be very radical, more like a Tom and Jerry cartoon.

What might be spoken of here, in this song of liberation and promise, is nothing short of a total dismantling of the scripts of human oppression. The child she carries in her womb is not coming to make the oppressed the new oppressors but is coming to rupture the whole pattern of oppression itself.

And a central clue to how this is achieved is connected to vulnerability – the vulnerability revealed in the incarnation - the birth of Jesus - and in the way he encounters oppressive power both in his life and his dying.

The Magnificat has been called a 'socialist agenda'. That's as may be. Better a Christian Agenda – at least for those who simply must link faith with life (a habit always to be commended as the only possible habit).

This Song of Mary speaks of power relations. It speaks of what God is about and what Jesus witnesses to, and of how we are to think and behave and act if we seek to know this God and to follow this brother of ours. Let's leave Mariology to the Mariologists, and any excessive piety to pietists, and follow the advice that we should read the Bible alongside reading the newspaper. That is, in dialogue with the concrete facts of our lived lives and our world.

Unless we do that, it's hardly worth reading at all. This world of ours is beautiful in so many ways, and yet also full of injustice and horror and grief.

Saying 'yes to God' means working to change that, and looking it in the eye. This is one of the magnificent messages of Advent and Christmas and of the whole Christian narrative.

Responding to it, with out whole hearts, is our greatest calling. **Amen**

Hugh Valentine



(I'd like us to conclude this reflection on the Gospel by singing Fred Kaan's hymn based on the Magnificat, The Song of Mary – and sung to the same tune as The Red Flag....)

Sing we a song of high revolt;
Make great the Lord, his name exalt:
Sing we the song that Mary sang
Of God at war with human wrong.
Sing we of him who deeply cares
And still with us our burden bears;
He, who with strength the proud disowns,
Brings down the mighty from their thrones.

By him the poor are lifted up:
He satisfies with bread and cup
The hungry folk of many lands;
The rich are left with empty hands.
He calls us to revolt and fight
With him for what is just and right
To sing and live Magnificat
In crowded street and council flat

Fred Kaan (1929-2009)