

Turning the world around

The sermon preached by the Rev Dr Michael Paterson
at the St Margaret's Eucharist on 15 August 2021 (Feast of the Blessed Virgin Mary)
The readings were 1 Chronicles 15:3-4, 15-16; 16:1-2;
1 Corinthians 15:20-27; Luke 1:39-56

I wonder what your family does when it gets together? Maybe you talk? Maybe you eat? Maybe you argue? Maybe you reminisce? One of my abiding memories as a child is of weddings and wakes that always turned into sing songs in which everyone was expected to do a turn. But people didn't just sing any old song. My family had its own budding Frank Sinatras, Ella Fitzgeralds and Nat King Coles. They might not have looked the part, but after two or three wee brandy and Babychams Auntie Anna and Uncle Henry were off.

Today's gospel offers us one of Jesus's family party pieces: the *Magnificat*. In fact the first two chapters of Luke's gospel are just song after song after song.

First up is Zechariah with his party piece, the *Benedictus*, about the freedom that is about to burst on to the world stage. Then we have the angels with their showstopping *Gloria*, heralding the birth of the baby in a manger. Next up is Mary with the *Magnificat* – whose lyrics we have just heard. And then there's Simeon with his finale – “Lord, now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace.”

Sadly nowadays singing is largely reserved for the terraces of Murrayfield or for national acts of remembrance. But in the history of God's people singing has been what God's people do whenever they get together.

Think of the psalms: God's song book for every occasion, with songs of ecstasy and despair, of celebration and lament. Think too of the negro spirituals, sung by slaves whose bodies were chained but whose spirits were free. “Swing low, sweet chariot, coming for to carry me home.”

That's a song of faith in a world beyond this one, but it's also a song of resistance and of protest against their cruel masters. And anyone who lived through the 1960s will know the power of songs like “Where have all the flowers gone?” and “We shall overcome” to rally people in the cause of peace.

I was fascinated to discover recently that in the months leading up to the demolition of the Berlin wall the citizens of Leipzig gathered every Monday evening to sing songs of hope and protest and justice. At first there only a few people came, but that grew to thousands upon thousands upon thousands. And when the Stasi, the East German secret police, were asked why they didn't crush the protest they replied, “We had no contingency plan for singing.”

Singing in the face of impossible situations – whether it's exile in Babylon (Psalm 137), slavery under cruel masters, peace in the face of war or the demolition of the Berlin Wall – is something which finds its roots in today's gospel.

Mary and Elizabeth knew how impossible their situations were – Elizabeth too old to bear a child; Mary too young to be married – and yet both called to bear sons through whom God would change the world.

There's no denying that their situations seemed impossible and yet, when faced with the odds, they did not retreat, or apologize, or fade into the woodwork or sink into despair

- they sang their **hearts** out;
- they sang their **hopes** out;
- they sang their **faith** out.





When our backs are to the wall and all looks grim, one of the most unexpected and transformative things we can do is **SING!** Sing out our protests for sure, but also sing out our **FAITH** and sing out our **HOPE** that tides **will** turn and blessings **will** return.

Hope comes into its own when we find ourselves up against the impossible and we can't fix them on our own. Hope is what we do when we cling by our finger nails to a God who can free the exile, let the slave run free, bring an end to war, and bring down the walls that divide us.

And if you want to learn the lyrics of hope, look no further than the *Magnificat* – Mary's song – a song about a world which is about to turn. We heard it in today's gospel, and we'll sing it again at the end of the service. But right now, I invite you to join me in singing a contemporary version of it called "The Canticle of the Turning":

- let's sing it today with the people of Plymouth after the shooting,
- let's sing it with the people of Afghanistan fleeing the Taliban,
- let's sing it with the people of Greece caught up in the fires,

and let's sing it with Mary and Elizabeth and with people, everywhere, longing for the world to turn.

Listen to the song we sang
and read Rory Cooney's contemporary
version of the Magnificat at
[https://www.youtube.com/
watch?v=F9QeTmRCpW4](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=F9QeTmRCpW4)