

# Along the track

## A Timely Message

When Mary said, “Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord. May it be done to me according to your word,” we are introduced to a woman of extraordinary faith.

Days later, Mary’s prayer, the “Magnificat” (Luke 1:46-55) didn’t come in a blinding flash, a bolt out of the blue. It is not by chance that her prayer contains a number of expressions from the Hebrew scriptures. She had been thinking that way, dreaming and praying that way and wanting us to come to know God’s vision where the humble, the poor, the dispossessed will find justice, mercy and love.

His mercy extends to those who fear him,  
from generation to generation.  
He has performed mighty deeds with his arm;  
he has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts.  
He has brought down rulers from their thrones  
but has lifted up the humble.  
He has filled the hungry with good things  
but has sent the rich away empty.

The Magnificat gave voice to a dramatic shift away from the old paradigms of power and oppression. She knew about God’s dealings because she had listened to and reflected on the scriptures. Mary’s message was born out of reflection on how God’s vision was one of equality, where people were not treated differently because of status or race or gender. That’s the message Mary passes on to her son.

Her son, Jesus was born into a tough world, a country occupied by a foreign power where political and religious tensions were commonplace, not just between Jew and Gentile but within Judaism as well. He lived among casual day labourers and fishermen, subsistence farmers and the vulnerable, the poor and those ostracised because of the purity laws.

Jesus began his public life on the Day of Atonement (*Yom Kippur*) which coincided that year with the Year of Release or Jubilee Year (Leviticus 25:8-11). Jesus was called upon to read the text for the day:

The Spirit of the Lord is on me,  
because the Lord has anointed me  
to proclaim good news to the poor.  
The Lord has sent me to bind up the broken hearted,  
to proclaim freedom for the captives  
and release from darkness for the prisoners,  
to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favour  
and the day of vengeance of our God,  
to comfort all who mourn, ... (Isaiah 61: 1-2 in Luke 4:18-19)

Then he simply sat down and said: “Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing.” In other words, this is why I am here.

That didn’t lead to an easy life or an easy message. Jesus traversed the land expressing what were considered at the time to be dangerous and heretical ideas. That constantly brought him into contact with the broken, the ostracised and those driven to the edges. In fact, he came to be known as the “man who welcomes sinners and eats with them” (Luke 15: 2). Jesus did not choose his inner circle from the elite but rather he chose fishermen, tax collectors, people of courage and faith. His care of the downtrodden brought him into conflict with the Jewish religious and cultural conventions as well as the authorities who enforced them. The fact that women played a such central role in his circle was very different from the norm. It is clear from the Gospels that they were with him from the beginning of his ministry, witnessed his death and became the first proclaimers of his resurrection.

So what’s the message? Mary, Jesus and we can safely assume, Joseph lived that vision daily. Jesus came to know it in action as a child and later in his working life with Joseph. Their example planted the seeds that helped to give birth to his mission, his vision of the Kingdom of God. What sort of message, what sort of vision are we handing on? What sort of message do we live day by day? What does it look like? What sort of future do we want, what are we passing on to our children that helps them understand that? Where do we ‘feed’ that vision, as it were? From the daily newspaper, from the wider media, by what we hear and see on social media? Who are we listening to? What do our children see in how we act and what we say? Do we seek out ways to see and hear God’s action?

Sadly, today there is a tendency to define ourselves by what we are against rather than by what we are for. That’s the easier course. To say ‘this is what I am for, this is what I think life is about, what the purpose of life is, what God’s vision might look like’ takes thought, prayer, courage and conviction. We need them all today. Jesus made pretty good use of them too.

Regards  
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