

“AND MARY SAID, ‘MY SOUL PROCLAIMS THE GREATNESS OF THE LORD. MY SPIRIT REJOICES IN GOD MY SAVIOR, FOR HE HAS LOOKED UPON HIS LOWLY SERVANT.’” This is the very next verse in the Gospel of Luke. The Gospel you just heard, the account of Mary’s visit to Elizabeth, is the occasion for that great song of Mary that ends the day, every day, for so many who pray the evening prayer of the Church. But as often as that song is part of our daily prayer, it is never the Gospel for Sunday Mass.

When Mary meets Elizabeth, Elizabeth is filled with Holy Spirit, who prompts her to make the first profession of faith of Luke’s Gospel: “HOW DOES IT HAPPEN THAT THE MOTHER OF MY LORD COMES TO ME.” When she pronounces a benediction on Mary for her faith in the word of God, Mary sings her song of praise that echoes down through the ages:

Mary includes herself among the anawim Yahweh, the lowly poor of the Lord: “MY SOUL PROCLAIMS THE GREATNESS OF THE LORD.... FOR HE HAS LOOKED UPON HIS LOWLY SERVANT.” She identifies herself as one of those economically poor, certainly, but also as one of those without power or status, among whom at the time were nearly all women and all children, and especially women who were pregnant. Mary is among those poor who have no recourse except to God and know it. Mary’s experience is not unique but typical. In first-century Palestine, the “rich” constituted about 2% of the total population. These elite had all the political, economic, and social power. They were to be deferred to and

given preference by the poor majority. Most of the elite lived in Jerusalem and other walled city in houses of stone, the original “gated-communities,” I suppose. In modern excavations, theirs are the homes uncovered. The thatched and mud homes of the poor did not survive. They lived on farmland owned by the elite and worked as tenants. It is difficult, if not impossible, for us to imagine the abject poverty and destitution that were part of the daily experience of peasants and villagers in this society. They lived from hand to mouth, buried in debt, struggling to find enough daily bread. Any wonder that “daily bread” is one of the petitions in that short prayer of Jesus we call the “Our Father”?

The reversal of fortunes in Mary’s Song is a great act of mercy for the vast majority of the population, even as it is bad news for rich rulers. But this is not reversal for the sake of reversal. It is not revenge. It is the fulfillment of the covenant God made with the people at Sinai and with Abraham. In both cases, God called Israel to be a contrast society built on mercy and compassion. Israel was to be a beacon to the surrounding nations, a witness to the presence of God living in their midst.

In our society, we find ourselves in a position of relative comfort and security, don’t we? We have food and shelter, toys and vacations, diversions, entertainment of all kinds. We have savings for retirement, meaningful work, a democracy in which, theoretically, there are no elite. Not as wealthy as some, we nevertheless enjoy a level of prosperity not even dreamed by most of the world throughout most of history. I sometimes wonder how I dare pray Mary’s Song.

Mary proclaims her song as the representative of the poor, their prophet. God has touched her personally, presented to her a challenge to bring to birth the incarnation of God. She accepts with joy. Hers is the ideal response to the word of God: obedient trust and sacrifice.

Mary proclaims the greatness of God, proclaims that Jesus is God's fulfillment of the ancient promises. God is now acting in this present moment to save Israel once and for all. As the prophet Micah proclaims in the first reading, the poor and the oppressed are not to look to the mighty capitol city of Jerusalem for their salvation. They are not to look to the elite of religion or government. They are not to look to those with power and influence. In any time or place, they are hardly ever involved in anything other than maintaining the status quo, their positions of privilege, and their wealth. No, the poor are to look to David's birthplace, to the insignificant little town of Bethlehem, to a mother pregnant with child, and to the child about to be born and reborn, again and again.

Throughout scripture we often encounter this ironic situation: God chooses the least, the most unlikely, the insignificant to accomplish his purpose: Abraham and Sarah, most unlikely parents for the children of the promise; Jacob, the younger brother of Esau; Joseph, next to the youngest son of Jacob; Saul from the insignificant tribe of Benjamin; David, youngest son of Jesse. And so on. Israel, poor, unimportant, insignificant, least among the nations, occupying a land of promise, described with some irony as a land of "milk and honey." One of the few places in the Middle East without oil.

God's mysterious plan continues in the Gospel today. Hope is again clothed in the least and most unlikely. Two unknown Jewish women, one old, one a teenager, both from relatively poor families, each carrying her first child, each carrying the hope of Israel and of the world. Each woman conceived under seemingly impossible conditions. These two lowly women begin the praise that will continue throughout the centuries.

The plan of God is supposed to continue in us. We are chosen to hear the message of salvation, to accept it into our hearts, to act on it, to preach it, to make sure that the message reaches the next generation: the message that in Jesus, the Christ, born into our world at Bethlehem, God is present among us. Too old? Too young? Too poor? Not educated enough? No time? Too infirm? Just the ones God calls for his work. Through just such as these the kingdom intended by God for the human family becomes real. In the power of the Holy Spirit, we are given the power to give new birth to the Word of God. Through the Spirit we too are able to praise God in her words: "MY SOUL PROCLAIMS THE GREATNESS OF THE LORD. MY SPIRIT REJOICES IN GOD MY SAVIOR....THE MIGHTY ONE HAS DONE GREAT THINGS FOR ME."