

## TAKING SIDES

Luke 1: 39-56

Have you ever had to take a side on an issue, in a situation, or on behalf of another person, a group or a cause? Have you ever had to take a side?... Have you ever been in a situation where you just couldn't stay neutral or uninvolved? Have you ever been drawn into a conflict or a disagreement where there have been serious enough issues of injustice, unfairness or abuse that you just couldn't walk away?...

Maybe it was about supporting a person who is a victim... Maybe it's about an organization, institution or company you've been a part of where someone is taking advantage of a privilege to the detriment and well-being of the whole. Maybe it's a colleague, a neighbour, a family member or a friend who needs support, advocacy or a listening ear. Maybe it's about getting educated and learning about something that's wrong rather than pretending it's not happening, hoping it will go away or claiming it's none of your business...

OK, but this begs a further set of questions... What's the cost of doing something?... What may you lose or give up to stand up, speak up or act? What's the cost? On the other hand, what's the cost of doing nothing?... What's the cost of simply claiming it's none of your business or just leaving it alone or just trying to make peace with it?... Is peace ever truly peace without some justice?... Yes, sometimes we need to compromise, but can you compromise with everything, especially if it perpetuates injustice or shoves issues and grievances under the carpet?... It's one thing to accept what you cannot change or what cannot be perfectly as it should, but it's another to pretend it hasn't happened or escape having to deal with it because you just want to be nice, or it's uncomfortable, unsettling or costly to get involved...

How much of our conscience is sharpened and activated by our willingness to get involved and how much does it get flattened and silenced if we turn away so that a piece of our humanity is lost?...

Well, such questioning is not only relevant for any one of us here who live in the real world of relationships and situations personal and social. No. Such questioning is also very much at the heart of our biblical picture of God and what God seeks to wake up in us human beings created in God's image. God takes sides. God takes sides on behalf of justice in a very unjust world. God takes sides on behalf of victims and seeks to empower them to rise up and engage the powers that be not in revenge or retaliation. No. The real victory is a confrontation with the injustices of the world and the powers behind them that does not get poisoned by hate and revenge.

And this all begins in the gospel story with a young teenager who gets pregnant before her customary time as a married woman. Rather than shame for being pregnant before her acceptable time in a world where shame would be inevitable, Mary gets bold, empowered, full of magnificent, brazen hope!

Mary's song, as it's been called, or the "Magnificat" as it's known in Latin, is an incredible piece of poetry right in the heart of the gospel story as Luke tells it. But Mary's song is not just beautiful poetry. It is aflame with a radical call to change. God is not some remote power somewhere in the heavens. No! God is alive and active taking sides against the deep inequality and injustice in our world. God takes sides alongside some over against others. What's the issue? Let me quote from Mary's song directly: "God has scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts. God has brought down the powerful from their thrones and lifted up the lowly; God has filled the hungry with good things and sent the rich away empty. God has come to the aid of God's people in remembrance of God's mercy..." Wow!

There are the poor, the hungry and the lowly as seen in the world, and there are the proud, the powerful, the rich and the self-satisfied. What side is God on? What side is Mary on? What side will this child be on as raised by his mother and eventually inspired and called to live into his vocation as Messiah by his Abba God? It's obvious isn't it? God is not neutral in a world where there are rich and poor, those with power and those without, those with plenty of food, living wastefully and extravagantly in many cases, and those desperate for a morsel of bread. There are also those arrogantly presuming themselves their own gods in control and those humbly seeking some support and care rather than judgement, blame and shame. God condemns one side and upholds the other. God seeks to knock down one side and lift up the other.

But how will God do this? Reading Mary's song in a literal way it's as if God will do this with some waving of some magical wand. One day it will just happen. Or, if we read Mary's Song in a more profound way, like much in the biblical narrative, we are being told what God will do seeking to activate what the reader can do when activated. You see, it's like the well known saying that goes something like this: Give a hungry person a fish to eat, or teach them how to fish so they can do something about their hunger in addition to anything you may give them. Teach them how to fish and they won't go hungry. Or, they will engage their hunger by tackling the systems and the people behind them that create the conditions of hunger. Teach them, inspire them, activate them, raise them up after they have been knocked down and do it again and again until they come alive even when the world seems so impossible to change.

Words of prophecy and poetry are intended to wake up and inflame listeners and readers with hope, and especially those who have fallen into a pit of hopelessness and apathy. The hungry can feel hopeless, especially in a world where it's so hard to change systems of inequality and injustice that have become as global as they are local. And those who live somewhat

comfortably in such a world can become apathetic and even resistant to hearing any cries of distress from the needy. We reflect a wide spectrum right here at Armour Heights. Some of us, and I am one of them, have little anxiety about our basic finances and needs. Others of us worry deeply about how we will make it through and how we will rise up to a better life less anxious about basic necessities like food, shelter and clothing in a context where we see how much people have around us. How do each of us, depending on our various circumstances, hear the words of the Magnificat and internalize them as a call to us to wake up and get activated as followers of Jesus?

We won't hear much about Mary through the gospel narrative... We do get glimpses of a mother worried about her son as he becomes popular among the crowds, as people flock to him from all over. Mary worries about Jesus and sometimes sends his younger siblings out to find him. But Jesus seems to put her and them off at times. Is it to dismiss them or protect them? We don't know. But Mary is there all the way even when she doesn't understand Jesus' end game. Even when his disciples follow him and then abandon him, Mary will be there alongside other women watching and internalizing her son's agony and anguish, his suffering and final dying on a Roman cross. Mary will be there taking it all in... Can you imagine? I think of all those mothers of Palestinian children or Sudanese children, as the children's cries become mere whispers because their emaciated bodies cannot produce sounds anymore, so hungry as they are... And also Israeli mothers too who had been protesting for years about their children and family members taken and killed October 7 and now grieving those who have died... It's horrible what happens when the fever of war and revenge possesses people, groups and systems without anyone able to exorcise those demons...

And yet, Mary's song is a song of empowerment and hope. After Mary will experience the awful and eventually horrific developments that see Jesus killed in the most ugly and humiliating of ways, she is also there when he rises up again not only in his person, but rises up again in that first group of followers when the flame of hope continues to spread throughout the early church. Mary is there, as are Jesus' siblings. The family is reunited again around the risen Christ. Mary's song is a song for the ages, because when the world is so full of injustice and inequality, it takes perseverance of prayer and hope over a lifetime and beyond to rise up and not fade away...

This is also why Mary herself becomes an icon of hope for all the hopeless throughout history. Even when the church through the ages sometimes made Jesus the universal Christ, the all ruling "*Pantocrator*" as he was called – ruler of all nations – Mary becomes elevated as the holy, transcendent mother of all, accessible to all who feel hopeless, hungry and downtrodden. Mary becomes the mother of compassionate presence and care for all who suffer affliction... And yet, let us never forget that Mary's spirit of compassion has a fierceness to it, a fight to it, a brazen hope that is not daunted by the enormity of the world's pain... We need Mary as much as we need her child, because her child will become in large part who Mary raises him to be.

Despite the shame and judgement that would render her child the product of an unwed mother and an immoral pregnancy, Mary will see in her child the pathway to victory, the victory of love in a world of hate, and the victory of bold and brazen compassion in a world that wants to turn away and forget what is wrong and unacceptable as it is.

So, do you take sides?... We need to make peace rather than war... But we can never make peace with injustice and inequality... We need to find ways toward reconciliation, but never at the cost of not taking a side when it comes to abuse and the taking of advantage of the vulnerable... Our humanity is at stake if we silence our conscience... If we want to follow the Christ, the Christ raised by a mother who sang the magnificent song at the start of the gospel narrative, we are most alive when we say no as much as we say yes, and when we are activated to stand up, speak up or accompany with compassionate solidarity those in whom we see Christ crucified in our world... Amen.