

Sunday, December 23rd, 2018, Advent 4

Readings: Micah 5:2-5a, Psalm 80:1-7, Hebrews 10:5-10, Luke 1:39-56

The Magnificat: Love in the Real World

Introduction

Today we have lit the candle of love. What does love mean? How can we interpret love? Years ago, the Swedish Christian scholar and Lutheran Bishop Anders Nygren wrote an enchanting and insightful work on love, where among other things, he reflected upon two Greek words found in classical Greek thought and in the New Testament: *eros* and *agape*. He suggested that *eros* is that sort of 'love' that is utilitarian, that is exercised out of self-interest, claiming others for our own advantage. *Agape* on the other hand, Nygren suggests, is that love which is worthy of the name: spontaneous, self-giving, where we surrender ourselves for others, not use them as a means for our advantage; where we love them for who they are, not who we want them to become. Without doubt, Nygren's work, is one of the most important Protestant contributions of the twentieth century, to biblical and ethical studies.

But; and this is my point: Nygren's discussion is very different to the way the Bible *actually* thinks and talks about love. In fact, the Bible never speaks about love in the abstract (like Nygren), but always in a concrete, practical way. This is precisely what we see this morning in the Magnificat: Luke's Gospel's rendition of Mary's song of praise to God. Put bluntly, the Magnificat, is not a philosophically pleasing, or quaint 'feel good' piece of theology, but a perceptive, disturbing, "savvy", understanding of how real power works, and still more, what one has to understand about power, in order to love effectively, to love meaningfully.

So, let us briefly examine how Luke's Gospel in general, and his Magnificat in particular, understand love *in the real world*. I want to do this under three rubrics: love in a world disfigured by conflicts of power; love in a world where power is not always obvious; love in a world where love itself comes from the most unexpected places.

The Magnificat

Love in a world disfigured by conflicts of power: In the Magnificat, Mary is usually painted as a young, rural peasant-girl of great piety and faith. That is true, but piety and faith do not imply naivety. This young woman is no fundamentalist simpleton, immersed in her Bible, ignorant of the world around her. In fact, her faith is the means, the window, through which her understanding of the real world is sharpened.

As Luke paints the picture of Mary, he presents her as a woman of a particular class - the *anawim*. The *anawim* were the poor; other expressions for them were "the bound", "the captives". Luke also speaks of her as "humble" (*tapeinosis*), but it is really important to get the nuance here. Luke is not referring just to her internal spiritual disposition, but equally, to her real humiliation, her social condition, the degraded and exploited state she and her people have endured at the hands of empire and temple. Mary is less a saint, who the Church later placed on a pedestal, but more, a fierce young woman, utterly clear about the abuse she and her people suffer. So, when we read the Magnificat, it starts off innocently enough, but by the end, it is clear that this woman is no "shrinking-violet". She and her people, still steadfastly, maintain their belief in Yahweh, *because* they seek, because they strain forward to their own freedom. For Mary, faith is about freedom and freedom is about faith.

Love in a world where power is not always obvious: In Luke, and more particularly, in the Magnificat, there is an astuteness about how power works in the world. There is the clear insight

that while power always serves particular interests, it masks over that partiality, that bias by pretending otherwise, justifying itself, building legitimacy. The Magnificat will have none of this. In it, we find a denunciation of power, an unmasking of its habitual partiality and false claims to legitimacy. Here, Mary already declares victory in the *great divine act of levelling*: “God has scattered the proud, “[God] has brought down the rulers from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly” (1:52). She continues, “[God] has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty” (1:53). By the end of her song, the powers have been exposed, unmasked for what they are, and the world has been stood on its head. Mary has stood on tip-toes and seen the kingdom.

Love from the most unexpected places: In the Magnificat, there is no sense that love is something that comes from a heavenly hierarchy. For Mary, God is not one who is above human reality, but rather, immersed in it: and never moreso than through Jesus: God in a woman, God *in* a woman’s womb. Mary’s profound statement is this: God does not seek to ‘lord it over us’, but to live *with* us, *in* us and *for* us. This God is as vulnerable as the very *anawim*, that social class from whom Mary emerges.

So?

So, what can we conclude about the Magnificat? We are all called to be Marys: “contemplatives in action”: prayerful but engaged, perceptive but agile, reflective but alert.

Meister Eckhart, the German medieval mystic, put it this way:

“We are all meant to be [theotokos], mothers of God [to be Marys] What good is it...if this eternal birth of the divine Son takes place unceasingly, but does not take place within myself? And, what good is it... if Mary is full of grace and I am not also actively full of grace? What good is it... for the Creator to give birth to his son if I do not also give birth to him in my time and my culture?”

(Meditations with Meister Eckhart, Matthew Fox, Santa Fe, NM: Bear & Company, 1983, pp. 74, 81.)