

## **A sermon for Advent 4, preached at Knox Church Dunedin New Zealand by Jordan Redding on Sunday 19 December 2021**

The Knox Church young adults' small group has been meeting over the course of Advent. To guide our conversation we have been focussing on Mary. Alongside the stories of Mary in scripture, we have also been contemplating a series of icons, artistic depictions of Mary in the Eastern Christian tradition. Icons are a tool for prayer, an aid to contemplation. And Mary is a common subject for iconography.

There are a number of ways in which Mary is typically depicted. In the first week of Advent, we looked at this icon: The *Oranta*, the praying one. Her arms are raised in an ancient posture of supplication and prayer. She gazes slightly off-centre, over the shoulder of the viewer, as if captivated by something we cannot see: the mystery of the living God who is ever-present and yet always out of the frame. Someone in our group noted that she has a wise, discerning face. Despite being a young woman, her facial features almost look older. Her eyes are almost comically big. This is not someone who is taking a blind leap of faith, helpless, ignorant, naive. But someone who ponders, intelligently discerns, seeking to understand the mystery of faith. (And we might see something of that in our reading today...)

The second week of Advent, we looked at this icon: The *Hodegetria*, Mary the Guide. Unlike the last type where she looks beyond the viewer, in this type she typically looks directly at the viewer, confronting us, asking us the question: well, what do you make of all this? She invites us in, through her gaze, to share in her devotion. Her whole body is kind of warped, leaning into, turned towards the Christchild. We are led through her to contemplate Christ. (Again, something we see when we take up Mary's song ourselves...)

And then, this week, we looked at this icon: The *Panakranta*, Mary the all-immaculate. Unlike the previous two, in this type Mary is depicted sitting on a throne, lifted up in glory. And not just any throne, this is the judgement seat occupied by Christ, a depiction of God's final judgement when the world will be set to right. And yet, astoundingly, here is Mary, Christ sitting in his mother's lap. For us Protestants, we're not used to thinking about Mary in this way, the apotheosis of Mary, the deification of Mary to the highest place. There may be part of us that instinctively reacts against such a depiction.

But actually it captures something of the essence of our scripture reading today from Luke. These words from Mary's song:

*He has brought down the powerful from their thrones,  
and lifted up the lowly;  
he has filled the hungry with good things,  
and sent the rich away empty.*

Mary is giving us a vision of where things are headed, God's final judgement, which has been set into motion with the lifting up of Jesus from the dead and, with him, all who have been made low. The one who was humiliated, brought low, suffered, and killed at the hands of the powerful, has been raised up to the highest place. The way things are in the world has been turned upside down.

This icon, then, is an image of defiance, of subversion, at the way the world is. Inviting us to contemplate Mary's gaze of? humility, compassion, sadness? as she surveys the tumult of history.

This turning things upside down is a common theme in Luke's gospel. So much so that it actually has a name: the Great Reversal. The icon depicts this Great Reversal. For much of history, the world has been judged by those in power. Mostly men. Mostly those who are rich. Mostly those who have military might or popular influence. If human history were anything to go by, we might expect to see an old man with a beard sitting on the throne of judgement. And there have been many attempts to depict God in this way.

But in Panakranta, Christ is depicted not as a full-grown man in the height of strength, but as a helpless child in the lap of his mother, Mary, the all-immaculate, Mary the untouched, the innocent. It is a confronting image to think that history could be judged by a child and his young mother. If we were to see the world through their eyes today, what would we see?

II.

Mary's song, depicted so powerfully in the panakranta, gives us an insight into the final judgement of the world. The trajectory of history. The orientation of all things through God who is setting things right. (Sand-timer, things have been flipped) It suggests that there is an orientation, a movement, a pull to our lives and to history, a meaning to it all. It's not all just a chaotic, dog-eat-dog world where you look out for your own because that's all there is.

And we can see this trajectory, this pattern in scripture. The vision articulated in Mary's song follows a long pattern reaching right back to the beginnings of the Hebrew Scriptures, the Old Testament.

Have you noticed that one of the ways to understand the story of scripture is as a long line of miraculous births? Sarah, Rebekah, Rachel, the matriarchs of Israel, were all unable to conceive until, unexpectedly, God heard their cries and they became pregnant. There are other lesser known examples as well. Seen in this way, the stories of Elizabeth and Mary are entirely predictable – with the exception that Mary’s pregnancy is doubly surprising because she’s still a virgin... as if Luke is saying, God is doing something completely new in Mary. Something completely inconceivable has been conceived.

The story of the Hebrew scriptures is a story of a miraculous, unexpected births in the midst of barrenness; of a God who is constantly bursting the banks of our expectations, birthing hope where there was none, bringing about God’s promises to Israel – not through acts of military might or displays of great power – but through a line of humble births.

Certainly there’s no shortage of violent and horrifically abusive stories in the Bible as well. But this central subversive thread remains through it all. God’s promises are enacted not through coercion, domination, taking away life – but through the giving of life.

III.

And of course there is Hannah, the mother of the prophet, Samuel, whose prayer we heard just now. Hannah’s prayer, you may have noticed, is remarkably similar to Mary’s song – hence why we heard them both alongside one another this morning. Luke was almost certainly echoing Hannah’s prayer in Mary’s song. There is a pattern here that Luke is drawing attention to. A trajectory of history.

A more technical word would be type. Mary is a type, an example of a common pattern. Hannah is a type. Luke has a typological view of history. Seeing these patterns emerge and draws our attention to the patterns, seeing something of who God is and how acts in the world in these patterns.

Now the skeptic might say, Luke’s just reading into things. In fact, isn’t all religion reading meaning into history that isn’t actually there? Well, maybe. But we all do it, not just religious folk. We all read patterns into our lives, trying to make meaning out of the things that happen to us, seeing in our lives a story, how various events have shaped us over the course of time. And we instinctively try to make sense of our present by looking back at history.

In recent times, we've seen the danger of this, for example in relation to the pandemic response, where people are very quick to draw analogies between our present situation and other times in history. The South African apartheid and the holocaust are mentioned with scary regularity.

So the question is not so much whether we place patterns on history but which patterns we choose to orient and make sense of our lives by. The patterns we choose have a real impact on how we respond to real-world situations, they impact profoundly on the course of history for good or for ill.

And so in the song of Mary, Luke is drawing our attention to a pattern, the pattern, the trajectory of history – fundamentally a claim that God is not abandoning this world to the forces of chaos and evil, but is turning things on their head, bringing down those in power and raising up those brought low; a claim that God's work begins, not on the global stage, with superpowers or multinational corporations, but with the lives of ordinary people like you and me; a claim that our lives can be a type, an example of the pattern, a sharing this long line of God's subversive salvation birthing in the world, like sand in the hourglass bringing about the fullness of time.

In the telling of the Christmas story every year, and more generally in regularly gathering for worship, we are joining our voices to Mary's song, learning to see and to live our lives according to this pattern of God's transformative love in the world, in which the little and the low will one day reign on the judgement seat of God.

Amen.

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