

# *the promises of God*

a sermon preached on the  
*third sunday of advent*

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at

*st john's*

ANGLICAN CHURCH CAMBERWELL

*by the reverend helen creed*

the lections: Isaiah 35:1-10; Luke 1: 46-55; James 5: 7-10; Matthew 11: 2-11

I want to start today by directing our attention to Mary's song of praise, "the Magnificat", this text so treasured by the Church . . . first set down by Luke some two thousand years ago, and, in the time since, set to so much exquisite music. (Thank you to our choir for bringing it to us again today).

In this small piece of text, we are offered a glimpse of a most sacred moment: when a young first-century Jewish woman, from an insignificant Galilean village, is touched to the core by the magnificence of God's promises, and the wonder of God fulfilling these promises in her. At this point in Luke's narrative, Mary has been visited by an angel who has greeted her as the "favoured one". When the angel has left Mary virtually runs to find the aged and pregnant Elizabeth, in an out of the way town in the hill country. Elizabeth promptly calls her "the mother of my Lord", and tells her that the unborn John the Baptist "leapt for joy" in her womb as soon as he heard Mary's voice. I'm surprised that Mary can get any words out at this point – but in all of this she sees God's *ancient promise of mercy* being fulfilled: in her very life, in the child she is carrying. Her "spirit rejoices" and the words overflow.

The simple thing I want us to notice about this text this morning, is that we have always imagined Mary bursting into song at this point – the original Greek is "Mary said," a phrase that indicates that she is praying . . . but somehow we know that it is only prayer expressed as song, that has any chance of capturing what is, in fact, Mary's *inexpressible* joy.

Now, before we lose ourselves in the lyricism of this text, it's also worth noting that this hymn of praise includes some highly subversive lines: Mary paints a picture of "the powerful" toppling from their thrones, and "the lowly" being lifted up. So Mary's understanding of God's promise to Israel, God's promise of "mercy", is that it is to do with the *material circumstances of our lives*. It is a promise to turn social power on its head, a promise to overthrow the systems that oppress and entrap. I think we tend to focus on the remarkable faith of Mary, but there's great strength, great intellectual strength, in her understanding of what the promises of God involve.

Promises are really important in human life, aren't they. We make formal promises to each other, in the presence of witnesses: when we marry, when we take on political office, when we enter certain vocations. A few weeks ago Mother Colleen made some significant promises before a large crowd gathered in the Cathedral . . . And there are all the informal, perhaps unspoken promises, that we rely on as friends, as work colleagues, as members of a family.

"I promise to watch your back."

"I promise to keep your secret".

"I promise to put the bins out."

There are the promises we make to children: to get them to eat, or do, or comply with, what is good for them . . . and there are the promises that our political leaders make in order to secure our vote. Hannah Arendt, the 20<sup>th</sup> century political philosopher points out that the reason promises are so important to us is that they help us to live with a sense of security: "Promises" she says, "are the

uniquely human way of *ordering the future*, making it predictable and reliable, to the extent that it is humanly possible.” (from wiseoldsayings.com)

In this age of extravagant advertising, and the proliferation of social influencers, we are daily exposed to promises of every sort. Voices from every direction promising us a multitude of “good”, if we will just invest our time, our money, our energies in the right way:

If you enrol your child here, she will be equipped for the future  
 If you invest your money here, you will be financially secure  
 If you buy this latest phone, the world will be at your fingertips  
 If you play *this* game on your phone, your brain function will improve  
 If you follow this particular diet, you’ll not just be healthier, you’ll also be morally superior.  
 According to one of the signs in Camberwell junction at the moment, if you take out a powerball ticket, you will “make the world your runway”.

Please don’t misunderstand me – I’m not being “holier than thou” and suggesting that none of these things – education, technology, superannuation, renovation – have any appeal or value, but let’s be clear, they’re not the “pearl of great price”, are they?

The weeks leading up to Christmas see an intensifying of the voices: If you buy these clothes & these plates & this outdoor setting, this perfect present, (& don’t worry about paying for anything now, you can pay “after”) – you’ll have a very happy family day, everyone cheerful, united, every material and spiritual need satisfied.

It has become customary in the church to bemoan the way the marketplace exploits Christmas, as if at this time in history we are particularly dumb about the meaning of the Christ story, and particularly deaf to what the incarnation does promise: which is, as Mary tells us – the promise to \*lift up the lowly, and to \*explode the systems of privilege and poverty that entrap us.

But . . . I would say that humans have always been vulnerable to the voices of those who promise every thrilling thing under the sun, wouldn’t you? And it’s not as if there was once a pure celebration of Christmas, which we’ve all fallen away from. I’m currently reading a book called *Christmas: A Biography* (and can I say the reason I’m reading this is because I’m on long service leave!) It’s written by an English historian, Judith Flanders. She writes that sometime before his death in 389 CE, Gregory of Nazianus, the Archbishop of Constantinople, warned against the Christmas celebration being caught up with what he saw as “secular” pleasures: in particular dancing and “feasting to excess”! In the mid-seventh century, Theodore Tarsus, the Archbishop of Canterbury, reminded his followers “that while it [is] fine to eat well at Christmas, the church frown[s] on gluttony”. (Judith Flanders, *Christmas: A History* Picador 2017, p. 6-7)

As with the generations before us, in these Advent weeks we can find ourselves churned up, thrown off balance, by all this pre-Christmas longing and desire, envy and effort, hype and promise. How good it is then, to come to church and hear the voices we have heard this morning: the voices of Isaiah and Mary, voices that have the potential to cut through some of the chaos and confusion of our hearts, as they speak to us of the promises of God.

I challenge anyone to listen to Isaiah 35 and not be touched by the scope and poetry of this vision of a renewed earth! Isaiah puts before us a picture of how God’s promises will be fulfilled: in human life and in the rest of creation. And it’s a magnificent picture, of plenty and renewal.

- the crocus doesn’t just “blossom” in Isaiah’s vision – it blossoms “abundantly”;
- the “burning sand” doesn’t just cool down a bit, it “becomes a pool”;
- the “lame” who have been doubly oppressed – by their health condition, and then a social system that has swept them aside – well, they don’t just get up and walk . . . according to Isaiah, they “leap like deer”;

& the “sorrow and sighing”, all the sadness that has been part of the systemic oppression of those born without privilege – it doesn’t just disappear – it “flees”.

Isaiah is very clear about who all this renewal is for: not for those asserting their strength and courage and cleverness and mastery over the challenges of life - but for those with “weak hands”, “feeble knees” & “fearful hearts” – the same people Mary calls “lowly”.

- the ones who know their neediness, their poverty, & know they do not have the capacity to bring themselves to life,
- the ones who look to the divine voice to raise them up,
- the ones who, when they have come to the end of their resources, are able to admit that they have.

I’d like to propose two questions, about promises, for us to contemplate during this third week of Advent:

Question number 1: What are the promises that are currently stirring our hearts, directing our energies? [Not the promises that sound good at church, but the promises that you’d share with your most non-judgemental friend.] Now, I’m not suggesting this question as a prelude to beating ourselves up about whatever these are – but, rather, as a way of becoming aware of what we’re directing our lives towards & what we’re investing ourselves in.

Question number 2:

How much are we making room in our day to attend to the promises of our most faithful God? And if the answer to that question is “not very much”, then let’s make some improvements. [It’s not rocket science, is it?] One simple way would be to spend some time, maybe five minutes each day, with Isaiah 35, or the Magnificat . . . or any other passage that speaks to you.

If God’s promises are not close to our hearts, then they can’t breathe their life into us, can they? They can’t speak to us, stir us, delight us, confront us, bring us up short, puzzle us . . . neither can they lead us to take our lives seriously, as creatures made in the image of God, as friends of the one who attended, first of all, to the blind, the deaf, the lame, the lepers, the dead and the poor.

By the power of the Spirit, may these ancient words of Isaiah and Mary lead us to put aside all the promises of the world for a time, in order to listen in to the promises of God. And because of this listening, may we feel our hearts move within us, so that this week, this Advent, might be a time when we, like Mary, can’t help but sing to the Lord, and to offer ourselves, once again, to the God who is always doing “great things for us”, to whom be all glory and praise.