

# THE MAGNIFICAT AS SOCIAL DOCUMENT

SUSAN CONNELLY rsj

THE MAGNIFICAT is a hymn used every day in the Church as part of the Prayer of the Church, often called the Breviary. Its name comes from the first word in its Latin translation, and the first line is: 'My soul proclaims Your greatness, O my God'. It is the song of Mary in St Luke's Gospel, proclaimed when she went to visit her cousin Elizabeth after she had been told that she was to be the mother of Jesus, and that Elizabeth was to have a child too. It's actually very like the hymn which Hannah sang in the old Testament when she found that she was to be the mother of Samuel. It is a song of praise of God and an act of faith in all the promises that God makes to the people.

Unfortunately, we often present a very wrong picture of Mary in the Church. Art, music and homilies more often than not emphasise her submission to God's will as passivity, her obedience as subjection, and her 'Yes' to God as something sweet, small and feeble.

Nothing could be further from the truth. In fact, the Magnificat is quite a subversive song, so much so that during the 1980s the government of Guatemala banned its public recitation.<sup>1</sup> 'When the evangelical Anglican missionary Henry Martyn went out to Calcutta as chaplain to the East India Company in 1805, he was appalled to discover that the British authorities had banned the recitation of the Magnificat at Evensong.'<sup>2</sup> '....the Magnificat was banned in Argentina after the Mothers of the Disappeared used it to call for nonviolent resistance to the ruling military junta in mid-1970s'.<sup>3</sup>

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the German Lutheran theologian killed by the Nazis in 1945, wrote:

The song of Mary is the oldest Advent hymn. It is at once the most passionate, the wildest, one might even say the most revolutionary Advent hymn ever sung. This is not the gentle, tender, dreamy Mary whom we sometimes see in paintings; this is the passionate, surrendered, proud, enthusiastic Mary who speaks out here..... This song.....is a hard, strong, inexorable song about collapsing thrones and humbled lords of this world, about the power of God and the powerlessness of humankind. These are the tones of the women prophets of the Old Testament that now come to life in Mary's mouth.<sup>4</sup>

Perhaps there's something here that we the Church need to look into. The Magnificat hasn't been banned in Church, but perhaps something worse has happened to it. Perhaps it's just rattled off, its words like wet cardboard in the mouth: dull, tasteless and best gone.

What we sometimes do is give it a totally 'spiritual' meaning, and thus we cut it off at the knees. The tendency to spiritualise earthly problems is the constant temptation faced by religious people. It is actually a way of not having to deal with them. It is ever so easy to say prayers for the poor and then to head for a warm bed on a full stomach. It is also easy to write and deliver talks on the ills of the world and not be prepared to put one's effort into addressing the issues.

The Magnificat is a whole world-view. It is the perception of a person who is thoroughly steeped in God, and if its message escapes us, or fails to ignite us, then that says a great deal about us.

The Magnificat is thoroughly traditional in its expression of the Jewish faith in a God who hears the cry of the poor, the God who exalts the lowly, the God who brings life out

of sterility. It is also thoroughly traditional in the Christian sense in its expression of the Resurrection faith in the God of Reversal, in its announcing in a nutshell the program of Jesus.

A superficial reading of the Magnificat finds that it is contrary to experience completely. When you look around the world today, we can't say that God has filled the hungry with good things and has sent the rich away empty. Or that the princes have been pulled from their thrones. They're there all right, planning all the time to work it so that they remain in power.

But a closer look reveals Mary's faith in the reality of God's love for her which impels her to declare to the hungry and the powerless what she herself knows from her own experience: that the status of being a nobody, a woman in an oppressed society, is the very cause of her being favoured by God, and hence of her sense of being filled, fulfilled and fruitful. She tells us unequivocally, as Jesus did, that God's favourites are the despised and the exploited and she asserts, again as Jesus did, that God will always have the last word. God does take sides.

Mary is convinced of God's power of reversal. The last are first, the weak are strong, the Crucified is Risen.

She says that the mighty are not mighty at all—they are all sprawling on the throne-room floor. They are ridiculous. It is no wonder ridicule of rulers is outlawed in totalitarian states. Ridicule is a consequence of insight, it comes from being able to see clearly. Remember Hannah's prayer on which Mary's is based, 'My mouth laughs at my enemies.' (1Sam. 2:1) As always, the cartoonists are the very best of commentators. We have the duty to ridicule, and thus undermine, those in public life, either in Church or State, whose use of power involves attacking or ignoring those whom God favours: the weak, the vulnerable. We can only do that with integrity though, if we are willing to look at ourselves in the mirror, and laugh heartily.



*Susan Connelly is a Sister of St Joseph and has taught in Catholic and State schools. She has worked with the people of East Timor and is concerned with the treatment of asylum seekers and other matters of justice.*

How we treat our fellow human beings is a question that we must address to ourselves, not to God. The checklist for the Last Judgment exists, and it makes clear that we are not going to be asked how many church rubrics we faithfully observed, or whether we were left or right, conservative or progressive. We're going to be asked how we welcomed the stranger, visited the detention centres, housed the homeless, stood up for asylum seekers. We'll be asked whether we followed the Gospel of Jesus Christ or the dictates of media owners, media personalities and commentators. We'll be asked whether we thought carefully about what a Christian response to the world's evils entails, and whether we prayed for the grace to make such a response, and whether we then made it.

The Australian Government's 'stop the boats' project has been hailed as a great 'success', because the boats have stopped. Other effects are not mentioned by Government officials, *e.g.* the harm done to Australia's integrity or its international standing as a civilised nation governed by the rule of law. Worse still, nothing has been said about the psychological harm done to people, including children, and the fear of being returned to danger.

How challenged do we allow ourselves to be by the highly accessible Pope Francis, who has burst onto the world's stage like a tornado of compassion, common-sense and conviction. In 2008 he prayed at Lampedusa in Italy, where asylum seekers had been drowned. He said:

Who among us has wept for these things, and things like this? Who has wept for the deaths

of these brothers and sisters? Who has wept for the people who were on the boat? For the young mothers carrying their babies? For these men who wanted something to support their families? We are a society that has forgotten the experience of weeping, of 'suffering with': the globalization of indifference has taken from us the ability to weep! .....

Let us ask the Lord for the grace to weep over our indifference, to weep over the cruelty in the world, in ourselves, and even in those who anonymously make socio-economic decisions that open the way to tragedies like this. 'Who has wept? Who in today's world has wept?'

How is my weeping program? How's yours?

Mary's song reminds us that there are always the poor, there are always the lowly and the needy who are to be exalted. There will always be the rich and the powerful to unseat. We undertake the path of transformation, the path of inner integrity, the path of Jesus. Transformation does not fix things. Even the death and resurrection of Jesus has not 'fixed' the world in the ordinary sense of the word. The hungry are not all fed, and brute power reigns. We are fixated on fixing things. In one sense that's good because we want what is good, we want to work for the Kingdom. But all that does not entail the necessity of us being there at the finish, or having the satisfaction of experiencing success. Some sow, others reap.

It is the process which transforms, entailing effort and commitment, first of all of the individual person and then of communities. Mary's song highlights the importance of the individual, whose relationship with God brings the perception which reverses self-centred thinking and acting, knowing that the outcome, in all probability, will be the same as it was for Jesus.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer was one man who saw clearly what the challenge of Jesus, and of Mary's song, meant for him in his time. This anecdote is set in 1934. There were many influential people who still thought Hitler might

be reasoned with. The Second World War, the concentration camps and the Final Solution were a long way off. They thought that Hitler might not be as mad as he appeared, and might be converted. Bonhoeffer thought differently. In a letter to a friend he wrote:

Hitler has shown himself quite plainly for what he is, and the church ought to know with whom it has to reckon... We have tried often enough—too often—to make Hitler aware of what is going on... Hitler is not in a position to listen to us; he is obdurate, and as such he must compel us to listen—it's that way around. It is naïve ... to try and convert Hitler—a ridiculous failure to recognise what is going on. We are the ones to be converted, not Hitler.<sup>6</sup>

The words of Bonhoeffer remind me of an episode of 'Living with the Enemy' which was shown recently on SBS. A man goes to live with a Muslim family in Sydney for a week, to find out how they tick. He goes to the Mosque and sits with the men, discussing. He raises the point that non-Muslims are not allowed into Mecca, that holiest city. He tells his hearers that on the contrary, Pope Francis was seen washing the feet of a Muslim woman at Easter, and he draws contrasts with the two scenarios. I suspect that he may have meant that the Pope's lesson shows that Muslims should be open to everyone, like the Pope is. However, I don't think the Pope meant that at all. I think the Pope was more likely to be teaching Christians about how Christians ought to act.

The primary and most proper response to the evils we see around us, from the abuse of children, to terrorists, to the power hungry lies of Governments, to the greed which wracks our world, is that we listen, and are converted once again and constantly, to Jesus. These realities compel us to listen. We are not here to solve all crises and maintain equilibrium. We are to listen, to see what is going on, and to be converted, converted to the utter single-mindedness of following Jesus in whatever situation. Only within the endless cycle of conversion will we know what to do.

But do we must. We cannot settle for an over-spiritualisation of Jesus' words, or Mary's. Let us not dress up timidity as prudence. Let us be willing to sing in the words of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, 'the passionate, wild and revolutionary song of Mary' as it should be sung, with full voice, exulting in God, reckless in the knowledge that we are loved, committed to the total ongoing personal and communal conversion required by the Gospel, and to act from the stance of joyful but weeping disciples.

My soul proclaims your greatness, O my God  
and my spirit exults in you, my Saviour,  
for your regard has blessed me,  
poor, and a serving woman.

From this day all generations will call me  
blessed,  
for you who are mighty have made me great.  
Most holy be your name.  
Your mercy is on those who fear you throughout  
all generations.  
You have shown strength with your arm,  
You have scattered the proud in their hearts'  
fantasy.  
You have put down the mighty from their seat,  
And have lifted up the powerless.  
You have filled the hungry with good things,  
and have sent the rich away empty.  
You, remembering your mercy, have helped your  
people Israel,  
As you promised Abraham and Sarah  
mercy to their children forever.

#### NOTES

1. Elizabeth A. Johnson. *Mary, Mary, Quite Contrary*. Retrieved from <http://www.uscatholic.org/2003/12/cov0312.htm> on 21.10.2004
2. <http://archive.thetablet.co.uk/article/5th-december-2009/20/what-is-it-about-mary>
3. <http://www.spiritualityandpractice.com/books/books.php?id=5746>
4. Quote from 'The Mystery of Holy Night' a

- compilation of Bonhoeffer's sermons and writings on Christmas.
5. [http://en.radiovaticana.va/storico/2013/07/08/pope\\_on\\_lampedusa\\_%80%9CC\\_the\\_globalization\\_of\\_indifference%20%80%9D/en1-708541](http://en.radiovaticana.va/storico/2013/07/08/pope_on_lampedusa_%80%9CC_the_globalization_of_indifference%20%80%9D/en1-708541)
  6. Metaxas, Eric. *Bonhoeffer: Pastor, Martyr, Prophet, Spy*. Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2010, p. 249.

## RESPONSE

### KRISH MATHAVAN MSC

**W**E HAVE HEARD the Magnificat as the subversive song of Mary who far from being a gentle, passive and helpless voice, expressed herself (in the words of Bonhoeffer) wildly and passionately in the spirit of the OT prophets regarding the power of God acting on behalf of the powerless. This was her experience as a woman in an oppressed society and yet still favoured by God. Therefore the Magnificat read and listened to in the right spirit challenges us primarily because it presents a different world-view of reversal, of

collapsing thrones and humbled lords, of God favouring and rescuing the poor and oppressed. Yet it is not a prayer of wishful thinking but a prayer of faith by Mary in the reality of God's love and mercy having the last word.

But more than just words to recite, or a spiritualization of worldly issues, the Magnificat calls forth and stirs us into action to be God's instruments to help bring about what is promised. In this sense it anticipates the program of Jesus who heralds the coming of God's reign on earth here and now. Susan