

Four Songs of the Nativity (Nativity – the Musical) Sermon 15/12/13

Music: I want to begin by playing the beautiful hymn – Ave Maria sung by Andrea Boticelli

Introduction

Last week Claire talked about Mary and Zechariah

- About their obedience and submission to God's will
- I want to carry on that theme this morning
- And look at the songs of praise they sang in response to what God was doing

As we read the nativity story there are four occasions when people break into song

- We are very familiar with the story
- But for those in the middle of it - it must have been mind blowing
- And so they could not contain or express their emotions and awe
- And so the Holy Spirit inspired them to burst into prophesies or songs of praise.

At its heart the nativity story is about God breaking into our lives

- Jesus is Immanuel – God with us
- This is not something that is just about knowledge
- It affects us on every level

When we meet with God

- We cannot express our feelings our desires in mere words
- That is why so much of worship is sung
- It is why the Holy Spirit gives some of us gifts of tongues and prophesy
- So we can express our inexpressible love, worship and wonder at God
- So we can respond to what God is doing and saying in us and through us

And Mary, Zechariah and others were no different.

- When God breaks in
- They are inspired by the Holy Spirit to express all that it means in prophetic 'songs'
- Over the ages musicians have set these words to music

That is why I wanted 'Ave Maria' played at the beginning

- It is based on the Angel Gabriel's address to Mary in Luke 1:28

“Greetings, you who are highly favoured! The Lord is with you.”

- In Latin, “Greetings, Mary” is “Ave Maria”

And it is with Mary we will start

- In Luke 1:39-45 we read of Mary visiting Elizabeth
- And when Elizabeth hears Mary’s voice her jumps in her womb
- And she exclaims how honoured she is to have the Mother of her Lord visiting her
- Mary then responds with a song of praise
- She pours out her heart about what God is doing in her life

Mary’s Song

We read Mary’s song in Luke 1:46-55

And Mary said:

“My soul glorifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour,

for he has been mindful of the humble state of his servant.

From now on all generations will call me blessed,

for the Mighty One has done great things for me— holy is his name.

His mercy extends to those who fear him, from generation to generation.

He has performed mighty deeds with his arm; he has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts.

He has brought down rulers from their thrones but has lifted up the humble.

He has filled the hungry with good things but has sent the rich away empty.

He has helped his servant Israel, remembering to be merciful

to Abraham and his descendants forever, just as he promised our ancestors.”

This song has become known as the Magnificat

- Because in the Latin Vulgate translation the first word is Magnificat
- From to Magnify or Glorify
- Mary is intensely aware of how honoured she is

The first section of the song expresses this

- She is offering all of herself to God - Body, Soul and Spirit
- *“My soul glorifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour”* (vs.46)

Just as God is three parts

- So we, who are made in his image comprise three parts
- A body, soul and spirit
- The Physical Body we see and feel
- Our character, will and mind that is our soul we sense

And our spirit, the part of us that allows us to relate to God

- That which makes us unique in all creation
- We read in Genesis 2:7
- 'Living' not in the physical sense but the eternal spiritual sense
- It was the spirit that died when Adam and Eve sinned
- And it is our spirits that come alive again when we are reconciled to God through accepting Jesus as Lord and Saviour

Mary was worshipping God with her whole self

- Her soul glorifies her Lord,
- Her Spirit rejoices in the salvation and spiritual rebirth he has promised
- And, of course her body is nurturing the Son of God through whom that salvation will come.

We too should be offering God all of us

- Not just some of our time and devotion but all of us
- Because we too are blessed
- Like Mary who says in vs. 49

"For the Mighty One has done great things for me— holy is his name."

This has echoes with the words of Jesus (Matt 22:37-38)

- When he was asked "What is the greatest commandment?"
- "Jesus replied: *"Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.' This is the first and greatest commandment"*

Whereas the first section expresses Mary's worship

- The second section expresses God's values and actions (vs. 50 – 53)

*His mercy extends to those who fear him, from generation to generation.
He has performed mighty deeds with his arm;*

*he has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts.
He has brought down rulers from their thrones but has lifted up the humble.
He has filled the hungry with good things but has sent the rich away empty.*

This is more controversial - almost political

- It suggests a reordering of society along God's values
- The rich, powerful and arrogant are brought low
- And the poor and hungry have their needs met
- Jesus was to be a radical revolutionary
- He was to turn the world upside down
- It is no wonder Herod was threatened by this baby

Jesus endorses these words when he begins his ministry (Luke 4:18-19)

- He stands up in the synagogue and reads from the Prophet Isaiah

"The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour."

- Then he rolls up the scroll, gives it back to the attendant, sits down and says
- *"Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing."*

So Mary has praised God for what he has done in her life

- For what Jesus has come to do.
- And then finally she rejoices in God's faithfulness in honouring His promise

He has helped his servant Israel, remembering to be merciful to Abraham and his descendants forever, just as he promised our ancestors." (Vs. 54-55)

This is God's promise to Abraham that through his offspring all nations will be blessed

- This is found in Genesis 22,
- Abraham has just passed the test
- He was willing to offer up his son as an sacrifice to God
- But God stops him at the last moment and provides a ram instead to be sacrificed

Then God makes the most amazing promise in the Bible

- Genesis 22:15 – 18

"The angel of the Lord called to Abraham from heaven a second time and said, "I swear by myself, declares the Lord, that because you have done this and have not withheld your son, your only son, I will surely bless you and make your descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and as the sand on the seashore. Your descendants will take possession of the cities of their enemies, and through your offspring all nations on earth will be blessed, because you have obeyed me."

In effect God is saying because Abraham was willing to give up his son

- God will not withhold his own son Jesus
- Just as He provided a ram to sacrifice in place of Isaac
- So he would send Jesus, 'The Lamb of God' as a sacrifice in our place for our sins

No wonder Mary was glorifying the Lord

Zechariah's Song

The next song is Zechariah's

- As Claire was sharing last week he was John the Baptist's father
- He had been unable to speak for the duration of Elizabeth's pregnancy
- As a sign God would honour his promise

Finally once the boy was born

- Zechariah writes that the boy is to be called John – God's gracious gift
- Then his voice returns and he praises God with a prophesy (Luke 1:68-79)

'Praise be to the Lord, the God of Israel, because he has come to his people and redeemed them. He has raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of his servant David (as he said through his holy prophets of long ago), salvation from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us – to show mercy to our ancestors and to remember his holy covenant, the oath he swore to our father Abraham: to rescue us from the hand of our enemies, and to enable us to serve him without fear in holiness and righteousness before him all our days.

And you, my child, will be called a prophet of the Most High; for you will go on before the Lord to prepare the way for him, to give his people the knowledge of salvation through the forgiveness of their sins, because of the tender mercy of our God, by which the rising sun will come to us from heaven to shine on those living in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the path of peace.'

This song has also been set to music and is known as the Benedictus

- Again from the Latin Vulgate of the first word 'Praise be'
- It has two sections
- The first is a prophesy about Jesus

Praising God because

- He has come to his people as Emmanuel – God with us
- In order to redeem us – pay the price to buy us back for God
- He is the promised descendant of David who will bring salvation
- Rescue his people *'and to enable us to serve him without fear in holiness and righteousness before him all our days.* (Vs. 78)

The purpose of Jesus saving us is not just so we are saved

- But to enable us to live holy and righteous lives
- To serve him without fear.
- As I read this I was really challenged – Do I really live up to this calling?

The prophesy then moves to someone who did

- Foretelling the role of John the Baptist
- To prepare the way for Jesus
- To get us ready to find forgiveness through him.
- *'To guide our feet into the path of peace'* (Vs. 79)

Peace – the theme for today's advent

- The Greek word used is Eirene, As in the name
- Peace meaning wellbeing, rest, quietness, to be reconciled.
- The corresponding Hebrew word is 'Shalom'
- Denoting wholeness and fulfilment.

The Angels Song

Peace is also the theme of the next song of praise

- This is in Luke 2:14
- The shepherds are in the fields when an angel appears and tells them of Jesus' birth
- Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel,
- Praising God and saying, *"Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those on whom his favour rests."*

This song is called 'Gloria in Exgelsis Deo'

- Again from the Latin Vulgate 'Glory to God in the Highest'
- It is a hymn of praise
- Indicating the result of praising God – peace

At that time Augustus was emperor in Rome

- He had introduced the 'Pax Romana' – the Roman Peace
- A political and military enforced peace
- The peace Jesus brings is found in restoration of our relationship with God

- In knowing Jesus is Lord in all meanings of the word
- And resting in his will.
- Enjoying his favour as it rests on us – his people.

Simeon's Song

Finally we have Simeon's Song

- Known as 'Nunc Dimittis'
- (From the Latin 'You may now dismiss')
- We find the story in Luke 2:25-33

"Now there was a man in Jerusalem called Simeon, who was righteous and devout. He was waiting for the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit was on him. It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not die before he had seen the Lord's Messiah. Moved by the Spirit, he went into the temple courts. When the parents brought in the child Jesus to do for him what the custom of the Law required, Simeon took him in his arms and praised God, saying:

"Sovereign Lord, as you have promised, you may now dismiss your servant in peace. For my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the sight of all nations: a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and the glory of your people Israel."

The child's father and mother marvelled at what was said about him. Then Simeon blessed them and said to Mary, his mother: "This child is destined to cause the falling and rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be spoken against, so that the thoughts of many hearts will be revealed. And a sword will pierce your own soul too."

Simeon was a godly and prayerful man

- He had been waiting all his life for God to fulfil his promise.
- This is a song that comes from the years of faithful prayer.
- It is fulfilment not just of God's promise but of Simeon's life's ambition
- To see God's salvation.

I admire Simeon – this is all we know of him

- Yet to reach that point in your life where you can look at all you've done
- And say I'm satisfied
- That I can depart in peace because everything I wanted is accomplished.
- That really is something

In an age where everyone is constantly striving for more

- Such contentment is amazing
- As I thought about this I wondered what I could learn from him
- And I came up with

1. Base your life on God's promises

2. Be guided by the Holy Spirit
3. Be faithful in prayer
4. Don't seek for yourself but for what God is doing in the lives of others.
5. Be grateful.

Conclusion

These songs of praise are all described as inspired by the Holy Spirit

- We should seek and pray for the holy Spirit to inspire and guide us
- He will enable us to glorify God and Jesus.
- As God continues to fulfil his promises

I am going to finish with Paul's word from Romans 5:1-11

Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, ²through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand. And we boast in the hope of the glory of God. ³Not only so, but we also glory in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; ⁴perseverance, character; and character, hope. ⁵And hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit, who has been given to us.

⁶You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly. ⁷Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous person, though for a good person someone might possibly dare to die. ⁸But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.

⁹Since we have now been justified by his blood, how much more shall we be saved from God's wrath through him! ¹⁰For if, while we were God's enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son, how much more, having been reconciled, shall we be saved through his life! ¹¹Not only is this so, but we also boast in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation.