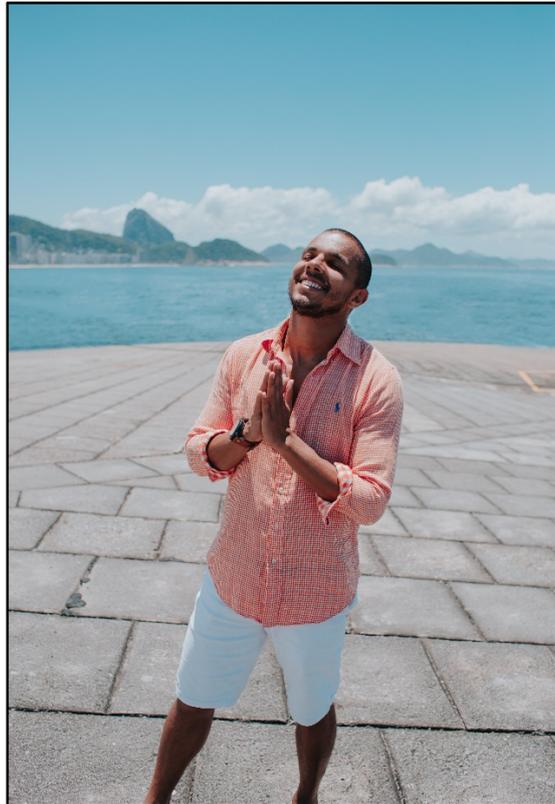


Sermon at St Andrew's on Sunday 19 December by Melanie Seward, Lay Reader

Readings: Micah 5: 2-5a and Luke 1:39-45, 46-55

Blessed are you



We sometimes describe a person as being blessed or 'blesséd'. Not everyone distinguishes between the two pronunciations. By 'blessed', we can mean that the individual has a natural quality or talent, or he or she has escaped catastrophe, come into money, or can put bread on the table. Some of us may use 'blesséd' as an acknowledgement of general 'wonderfulness' or to imply holiness. Of course, there is a recent use of blessed to indicate downright annoyance, as in 'that blessed dog has chewed my slippers again'.

Take a moment - Would we see ourselves as being blessed or being blessed?

In the Gospel reading, Mary goes to visit her older cousin, or aunt, called Elizabeth. Both women are unexpectedly pregnant. Elizabeth and Zechariah have not had children in their marriage and are moving on in years. Mary, most likely barely old enough for us to call her a woman, was betrothed or contracted to marry Joseph. Elizabeth is moved by God's Spirit to cry out loudly, 'Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb.'

Setting aside the discussion about the meaning of betrothal in Mary's time, it is safe to say that she would have been seen as one who had fallen short, outside the circle of faithful living; after all, the claim was that Joseph was not the father and might walk away from the relationship. There is talk about an angel, and Mary has told Joseph that the pregnancy is God's doing. Her being with child may well have brought shame and isolation; maybe this is her motivation for travelling to meet an older, more sympathetic and supportive member of the family. But blessedness is not to be equated with what society sees as blessedness; in our society, that is status and a certain lifestyle - it is a matter for God.

At the sound of Mary's greeting, Elizabeth feels the child in her womb leap for joy. She knows intuitively, or perhaps through divine inspiration, that Mary is the 'Mother of her Lord' - that Elizabeth's own child is connected to Mary's child who will be Lord.

Elizabeth states, 'Blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfilment of what was spoken to her by the Lord.' The blessedness stems from God putting into action his plan of salvation for the world through pregnancy, and it is this that Mary believes.

Mary responds in song and these words are sung in what is called the Magnificat:

***'My soul magnifies the Lord,
and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour,
for he has looked with favour on the lowliness of his
servant.....'***

This song is more than a mother expressing the joy of pregnancy; it is praise, adulation and thanksgiving addressed to God who is acting in her life and in the world to save his people. Mary's blessedness affects how she sees not just her life but the whole of life, how she sees not just her world but the whole world with its past, present and future - the whole of time.

This blessedness of Mary will bring forth Jesus into the world and be the means of salvation for all mankind. Blessedness heralds hope and saving grace, but what will this blessedness mean for Mary? We might say that it empowers Mary. Through the medium of Song, she makes the claim for her role in God's history. She places herself in a long historical tradition of biblical women who respond to God stepping into their lives in song - raised with the inheritance of Miriam, Hannah and Deborah, Mary joins the

tradition with her song. Interestingly, she is far from the timid and obedient and tranquil Mary of many statues and paintings. Do not tame the Magnificat – see it as evidence of a woman of strength, of joy and of great prophetic insight for blessedness brings inspiration, empowerment and action.

What else will this blessedness bring to Mary? A husband, a family, worry, abuse at a son who goes around preaching as if he is the Messiah, healing and forgiving sins like he is God. She will find herself watching the agonising death of her son on the Cross. She will be called upon to offer encouragement and support to the first believers. Blessedness is not all about what we perceive to be 'benefits'; it can bring misfortune and suffering and with them insight and compassion.

So, are we blessed or blessed? I offer three answers.

We are blessed in that we are all made in the image of God and as such have the potential to live and work to God's glory, to be the people he wants us to be and to live with others as he intended. Our blessedness in this regard calls us to recognise the blessedness of others.

We work to embrace our blessedness by coming to understand more fully that we are loved, accompanied and strengthened by a God who is very real and ever present.

Although sometimes it can be easy to forget this, whenever we feel God's otherness - his presence, we are blessed.

And remember Mary. Benefits and losses, status and achievement, social acceptance or rejection are not signs of blessedness. It's all about whether we are willing to open ourselves up so that we can respond to God's calling. Will we participate in God's work in the world in our families and places of worship, in the workplace and our community? Mary remains a clear and inspirational model for how a human being can do this. She is 'Called' and she responds in faith. She is blessed. She points to the fact that all of us have the capacity to live a life that is, at its core, shaped by God.