

## 1 Song for a Child

Miriam believed. That doesn't mean that henceforward she carried around in her head a doctrine or a new sentence for scripture. It means that Now, in that eternal moment when God proposed to change her life and change the world, to fulfil his longstanding promises and to bring into being the Messiah, within her body, she recognised and accepted that everything about her, her people and her world was firmly under the rule of God, for her to accept God's word and God's doing, on God's terms.

“I am the Lord's serving girl. Let everything you told me be done as you have said.”

Moreover, because his barren wife had indeed conceived a child, even the life-hardened priest learnt to believe. His son would indeed be born – to go ahead of the Messiah as his herald. In Miriam and Zechariah faith ran glad and deep, awakening the fullest hopes and the oldest stories of their people, memories and expectations that now exploded into present history, alive, vibrant and fulfilled. Both of them gave welcome to the age of the Messiah, each differently, but both as believing and faithful Jews, aware of the deeds and promises of God that were now coming to fruition.

When Miriam heard of Elizabeth's pregnancy, she hurried up to Judea to visit her, for they were related. When they met, two unexpectedly pregnant women, each overjoyed with the life in their womb, each inspired with the imminence of God's blessing, Miriam poured out her happiness and her passion in the song of her child:<sup>1</sup>

My soul glorifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,  
Because he has looked upon this small thing, his servant.  
See, from this time on every generation will call me blessed,  
For the powerful One has done great things for me, and his name is holy.  
His mercy goes out generation after generation to those who hold him in awe.  
He has done mighty deeds in the strength of his arm –  
Scattered the big-dealers in the pride of their plans.  
He has thrown down the powerful from their thrones and lifted up the lowly;  
Filled the hungry with good food, and sent the rich away empty.  
He has come to the help of his servant Israel, remembering his mercy,  
As he promised to our fathers, his word to Abraham and Abraham's seed forever.  
(Luke 1: 46 – 55)

Miriam's song is an irrepressible song of praise for God her savior. Her savior? How does she need a savior – a young, healthy woman engaged to a skilled workman, free to travel the length of her country unmolested? What can a savior mean to her? But Miriam is a daughter of Israel and, for all her personal happiness, her heart is alive to the bitter experience of Israel. She knows Israel's need and her need of a savior from the oppression and injustice that she and her people feel passionately. Let us make no mistake about it. Miriam's joy is not liturgical. Her joy is sheer physical joy for the despised, the weak, the poor, the hungry - for the savior they have been given.

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<sup>1</sup>This is the song that has become known in Christian liturgy as the “Magnificat”.

## Jesus Messiah

In her body God has begun a revolution. Choosing an insignificant young woman engaged to a workman, to be the mother of the Messiah is but the beginning of the deeds God will do in Israel to overturn the world's order and demolish all its measures of importance. He has caught up the arrogant in their own proud schemes and scattered them to the winds. He doesn't need to undo their plans, for at one stroke he has made them irrelevant. Their achievements are simply cancelled. The very schemes and congratulations they nourish in their hearts disgrace them at the approach of God's Messiah. He has brought down the mighty from their thrones. Tho they appear to sit there still, the thrones might as well be a pit. Even before he demolishes the pillars and domes, the palaces of stone and the towers of steel and glass, their high prestige projects, their power has come to an end. It no longer counts.

God has lifted up the lowly. The Messiah himself, the expected and anointed ruler of all rulers bypasses and relegates all thrones and seats of power, born to an artisan's wife in Nazareth. The insignificant are to be the Messiah's people, the Messiah's family. The poor and the hungry who long for simple nourishment, for the food that puts flesh on a wasting body, for the shelter of a place they can call "home" without fear of bombs or bulldozers, who hunger for respect and human rights, these the Lord God now fills with good things, beginning with that deep-reaching and transforming gift which is God's friendship. While the rich, whether the well-heeled and satisfied or the greedy and dissatisfied, those who have their hands on the world's goods and think they need them all, or those who gloat in the power of having more than they need, all these, the rich, are sent away empty.

God has chosen Israel, a puny nation, to be God's child. God has remembered his promises to their ancestor Abraham, and his commitment to all of Abraham's descendants: the fulfilment is moving in her womb. What Miriam expects is nothing less than everything God has promised in the history of Israel.

Anyone who thinks the Messiah of Israel is not a political figure does not know Israel's Bible and has forgotten the gospel written by Luke. Miriam had no doubts and no illusions. In the deed God has done, in the child now living in her womb, God has overturned the order of the world. Political and economic powers are thrown down and rejected, the weak and the hungry now come into their own, the favour of God. This is the expectation in which Israel is now liberated.

Let's not delude ourselves that behind Miriam's passionate outburst lies some piously re-interpretable, spiritual meaning. Miriam knew the bloody realities of oppression. Even in her short lifetime and in her little province of Galilee, there had been a number of revolts against the power of Rome and the burden of taxes that systematically destroyed the poor. Small farmers and artisans whose work had to pay for the luxuries of a ruling class and the expenses of an army of occupation, had risen up in rebellion when they could take it no longer, and had been brutally crushed by the Roman legions: slaughtered or enslaved, or crucified as an example to any others who thought of resisting their rulers.

Miriam's song is a young woman's hope for the liberation of the poor, her people, under a new reign of justice: triumph for the oppressed in a world turned over, freedom and security for the weak in the hands of God. She had his assurance, both his word and the living body inside her, that at last he had taken up his work to finish it, and that could only mean – for her God had long since shown Israel where his sympathies and his passionate energies moved him – that the day of the poor and the powerless was come at last. That, for her, was the meaning of Messiah, and if any other meaning was to overthrow this, then Miriam was deceived in her joy. If this is

not to be, if the saving revolution is not to come after all, the sorrow of it will pierce her soul like a dagger.

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There was something very different, tho he drew on the same ancient traditions, in the expectations of the priest. Zechariah also looked back to the promises of freedom and security made in the past. He too looked back to the history of Abraham and to God's original promise. But Zechariah, like an older and wiser man, knew that revolution had to go deeper than the social order, and that salvation, freedom, liberation from fear, had to come into the very hearts of the liberated – that they had to be liberated from their own sin.

When his son was born, Zechariah recovered his power of speech and strait away burst into a powerful song of praise to God - the priest's song for his child, whom they had named John:<sup>1</sup>

Blessed be the Lord, the God of Israel, because he has turned to his people to accomplish their liberation.

He has raised up a sword for our deliverance in the house of his servant David, just as his promise was, in the words of the holy ones, his prophets of long ago.

He has saved us from our enemies and rescued us from the hands of those who hate us; extending his mercy to our fathers, and remembering his covenant with them.

That is the oath he swore to our father Abraham: that he would make space for us to worship him, free from fear and safe from our enemies, in holiness and justice all the days of our life. (Luke 1: 68 – 75)

Zechariah's thoughts run with the hopes of his people for a re-ordering of the world in their favour, for a new intervention of God's power to liberate them from oppression, and like Miriam he confidently sees this not as a new decision on God's part but as the fulfilment of God's commitment to Abraham. Only what is that commitment – that promise on which he and Miriam now count as the promise of Israel's liberation? Zechariah calls it the "covenant" – "diatheke" in Greek – which is the fundamental bond or relationship between God and God's people. It was a bond in both senses: a sharing of life and experience that held them together as belonging – God and God's people – one with the other; and it was an explicit commitment, a promise and an undertaking. On God's part it was the promise to give his people the space, the land and the security, to be his people, worshipping and honoring him in all their lives by the very holiness, right and justice that would characterise their society, their being as a people. On their part, it was an undertaking to be that holy, right and just people of God.

Zechariah however has an understanding that comes with age and disappointment – perhaps a lesson still to reach Miriam – that the liberation we most need is liberation from fear within (we will be free when free from fear we worship God) and ultimately from guilt, from the enemy sin that gives us cause to fear, darkening our world and confounding our peace.

And you, my child, will be called Prophet of the Most High God,

for you will go before the Lord to prepare his road;

your task to bring his people the taste of salvation in the forgiveness of their sins,

in God's deep heart of mercy, from which the sun shall rise for us,

to shine on those who lie in the dark shadow of death

and set our feet safely on the road to peace.

(Luke 1: 76 – 79)

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<sup>1</sup> Known in Christian liturgy as the "Benedictus".

## Jesus Messiah

For Zechariah, the liberation to come was more psychological and spiritual. Even those enemies he spoke of, those who hate Israel, were really no more than a prelude to the dark hostility of sin from which Israel is now to be delivered. What stirs his hope and releases his soul is not the power of God overturning a corrupt establishment, but the mercy of God forgiving sin, in which all Israel is entrapped. This is the new dawn. This is the pathway opening up and leading them to safety, security and peace.

Zechariah was wise enough to know that a king and an army, however godly, would not be enough to liberate Israel. In his caution he had doubted the word of God, but he had the virtues of his faults. He knew how deeply and thoroughly God would have to be at work in Israel if he was indeed coming to save her. Israel's own heart would have to be changed and the people who hoped for God would themselves have to be forgiven.

It is tempting to say that Zechariah was "older and wiser" than Miriam, and that the priest understood the ways of God more deeply and fully than the young up-country woman. But it was Miriam who believed straight away, and there is something of equal value in her simple, straightforward expectations. What is the way of God, and the way of God's Messiah? Miriam foresees a revolution; Zechariah sees forgiveness and liberation from sin. Which of them is right?

I believe that they are both right, and that we are ment to understand that they are both right. It is, of course, the writer Luke who has spun together these songs and put them into the mouth of the great characters of his history. That was the normal practice in his time: historians would put their interpretation of events into the mouth of a leading protagonist, as a speech, a song, a poem or a letter. And Luke interprets the great event of the Messiah's birth thru a compilation of quotes from the Hebrew Bible, which he puts into the mouths of Miriam and Zechariah as inspired and prophetic songs.

And that, I believe, is how inspiration flows in Scripture – not that God dictates words which issue as defined and authoritative doctrine, or that a literal record of actions performed is somehow preserved for us, but that writers use their skills to convey, in their own style, the truth of great events that they or others have witnessed. They witness to God, and the Spirit of God moves in them, with them, speaking the truth that enlightens and liberates in the words, the stories, the characters they choose to create. And it is in that sense that the gospel-writer Luke is inspired: he writes the truth about God for us, but in his own best way of telling things.

Luke is the most skilful storyteller of the New Testament and in the story he weaves he is concerned always to glorify God and to witness to the Spirit of God that flows in Jesus the Messiah. He has a keen sense of character, in the literary sense, and his characters speak appropriately: they are themselves, whether drawn from experience or constructed from the texts available to Luke. It is not incidental, but by Luke's skilful and faithful composition, that Miriam speaks with the fire and energy of youth and Zechariah with the balance and reflective understanding of age. Both sing of the Messiah, and both rightly testify to the Child who is about to come among them.

I was also tempted, above, to say that, while Miriam's hope was social, Zechariah's was more personal and individual. But it isn't. Fear and sin, psychology and the spirit, forgiveness and peace – these are as much social and national attributes and actions as they are individual. Neither Zechariah nor Luke has learnt to separate the private from the social to the point where, as in our culture, you can imagine them distinct if overlapping worlds. Zechariah speaks of the

fear, the sin, the forgiveness and the dawning of light and peace upon the nation of Israel, in which all Israelites, one way and another, find their soul and their way. Neither Miriam nor Zechariah has dreamt of identifying the human heart apart from the human community. For them, no such identity-in-isolation exists.

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When Miriam's time was near, she and her husband Joseph, who were descendants of King David, took the long journey from Nazareth to Bethlehem, to be counted in their own family town for a government census. Arriving there, they looked for an inn, but Bethlehem's inn was full – summer was coming on and there were a lot of people travelling. Possibly too, a lot of people reckoned themselves as descendants of David's family, and so came to be counted in David's town. Maybe if Joseph had been able to rattle a bag of money before the innkeeper's nose, room would have been found. But Joseph was not rich, however royal his family tree, and innkeepers can't make a living out of genealogy. There was room in the animals' compound, among the tethering places, the straw, the feeding boxes and the warm, steaming dung, and there, when Miriam and Joseph had settled in, Miriam's child was born. She swaddled him in rags, as the custom was, and laid him in one of the animals' feeding boxes. He could be made warm there, while his mother recovered from the birth.

Did anyone notice?

Children of course are born wherever their mothers are when the birth pangs come on. You like to arrange it safely at home, with all the women of your family around you to help – but at busy or disturbed times, or when you must travel, mother and child have to take their chances, with whatever protection friends or strangers will give them. So the Messiah, the savior of Israel and the world, was born in the animal compound at Bethlehem.

Did anyone notice such a momentous event? So far the news had been conveyed to a north-country girl and a skeptical priest and his wife. High time surely, for God to send an angel to some of the more important people in Israel: the well-informed, the religious leaders, people with experience who would know what to do about it.

If you cross the social map to get about as far as you can from pious, good-living and respectable people such as frequent the temple and attend to their religious duties in due time and order, you get to the barely tolerable people on the fringes of society - like shepherds, whose rough lives were tied to the movements of their flocks, which jarred with the times and the dates, and the rituals and washings, of proper worship. They were probably outside the Law. Between feeding and protecting their sheep, they hardly found time to observe the Sabbath as a Jew should. Their animals, of course, were indispensable to the acts of worship in God's temple. They were not. If ever these coarse, unwashed, ungodly ruffians appeared in the temple it was only to deliver their lambs and clear off with the money.

On the night that Jesus was born, there were shepherds looking after their flocks on the hillsides around Bethlehem. And now the news is for them. The news that Israel has been waiting for is shared not with national leaders or temple priests, not with the good and religious people, but with outcast workers, the uncouth and uninstructed labourers whose work is with the animals. They are told the news:

Tonight a child has been born for you. He is the Savior, the Messiah, the Lord. (Lk 2:11)

## Jesus Messiah

In fact, the shepherds saw the sky filled with angels, who sang the best song the world has ever heard.

Glory to God in the highest heavens  
And on earth peace to the people, who have God's blessing. (Luke 2:14)

It is a very simple verse, the stuff of which children's tableaux and Christmas cards are made, and yet it carries a weight of theology that fulfils the whole of the Hebrew Bible. We can only hint at it here, just as Luke is only previewing what the whole of his writing will unfold.

Firstly, that the news is glory to God. What god is this who gets glory from any of the events in human history, however marvellous, however beautiful, however good? Surely only a pagan god reaps glory from the world of human beings? Surely the true and transcendent God, the Creator of the universe, has all possible glory in himself and needs nothing from the universe? And yet angels fill the sky singing "Glory to God in the highest heavens!"

This is the God who from the beginning had shown himself as God-with: God with his people, God with his prophets and chosen kings, God with Israel. This is the God who has declared himself in love with his people, the rescuer, the teacher, the defender, the bridegroom of Israel. This is God who has long since chosen to be identified as the God of Israel, the God of Abraham – to be acknowledged, recognised, loved not as God in splendid isolation but God of and with his people Israel.

And so – by God's own choice – the glory of God, that in which Godself invests and recognises God's own reality, is not something locked within the unapproachable being of God, but exists in relationship to the world, in a relationship that constitutes the history of Israel and now comes to completion in the birth of Jesus the Messiah. God's glory can ultimately be in no other being than Godself, yet the angels fill this night sky to cry Glory to God in the highest heaven! Even in God's transcendent, ultimate sphere of being there is to be glory to God for the events now happening in the little town of Bethlehem.

And here on earth, in the world and the history we know, there is to be peace. God reaches out to God's people with the peace and reassurance Zechariah had foreseen, peace that takes away the root of all fear because they have God's assurance of God's love. God's good will is theirs and the Creator of the universe has their well-being at heart.

The baby has been put in a feeding box in the animal compound, because that's the best his parents could do for him. And he is the Savior, the long promised ruler of Israel. There is neither palace nor temple to receive him – just a box of straw. And that is the glory of God.

The shepherds came to see for themselves, and to their eyes and noses the straw, the dung and the animal warmth were not a problem. When they saw the baby and its mother they knew they had seen the savior of Israel. The word was out. They hurried to spread it among their people. Believing what they had heard and seen, they rushed out to tell the world. And that is the glory of God.

What is faith? What is it to believe? If the shepherds had espoused a doctrine, presumably they would have sat down to marshall the arguments for it. That's what we do with doctrines. But they had seen the One who was to change Israel forever – the only thing to do was to go and

tell! To believe that this child, the Messiah, was born, is to tell the world that it can pack up its main business and forget it – for someone has come who supersedes and dates it all. To believe this is far more than holding and defending a doctrine. It's to have a heart bursting with exciting news, a radically different attitude to the powers around us and a knowledge that banishes fear and calculation.

Tied up with the story of Jesus' beginnings is the doctrine of the "Virgin Birth". Miriam who conceived him did so without the normal coming together in sex. Neither Joseph nor any other man was his father. For the 20<sup>th</sup> or the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the doctrine of such a virgin birth is as mind-boggling as it was for the first. But that is the worst it can do – boggle our minds. If we believe it, it won't send us tearing around to the neighbors with the good news – nor will it pitch us against the powers of the world and the evil they perpetrate. The devil, I suppose, believes in the virgin birth.

To believe in Jesus the Messiah is to live in the faith of Miriam's song, and Zechariah's. It is to put our life and our bank balance with the poor of the world and to tell the stock exchange, or the International Monetary Fund, that they are profoundly out of date, to tell the advertising industry that its wares are lies and illusion. It is to be fired with such visions of glory that the burden of money and the chains of power fall off us and we stand free in the world turned upside down by his coming. It is to step gladly out of that fear that builds a nuclear arsenal and fantasises about a missile shield. It is to welcome the dawning light and the way that opens up out of our tangled darkness of delusion and sin. It would probably destroy any career or recognition we might have in the world. To believe that the powerful are overthrown and the rich empty, that our hearts and our social structures are no longer mortgaged to corruption and fear, that the way out lies, even now, open before our feet – this will overturn and shatter our lives.

Many Christians, myself included, believe in the virgin birth, but whatever we make of such a doctrine, we will find it much harder to accept the song of the angels and the songs of Miriam and Zechariah. In fact, the only way to survive them is to turn them into a comfortable liturgical routine and so to cushion their radical impact with reassuring familiarity. But that is not to believe them. The songs in the first two chapters of Luke are much harder to believe than any doctrine or creed the Church has come up with since, for they undermine every system of power and control, every scheme for exploitation and profit that obsessive human greed, fear, or piety will ever assemble. And we are notoriously greedy, fearful and pious. They are the songs of revolution, and God's revolution at that, the most dangerous and upsetting revolution of all. The real challenge to faith in Luke's gospel (and the one that the Church has failed over and over again) is not the Virgin Birth but the songs inspired by the child who was born.

To those of us who think we know how the world works, and benefit from the knowledge, who think we know what is real and practical, Miriam must appear as a woman whose illusions are dangerous only because of the passion and conviction behind them. Zechariah, we will think, would have been better to stick to his skepticism. Young women will see visions, and old men will dream dreams – but we who are realists will not believe them.

To those of us who want the security of the Bible without its challenge, it's better to concentrate debate on a belief that only alters our concepts, like the virgin birth. A modicum of well-catechised belief may accept the virgin birth, but it takes a passionate and life-changing commitment of faith to believe in the Magnificat or the Benedictus.

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## Jesus Messiah

A few days after he was born, Miriam and Joseph took their child up to Jerusalem, to have him circumcised and to make an offering of redemption, because, as the first-born, he belonged to God. In the temple, there was an old man named Simeon who had lived long in the hope of setting eyes on Israel's savior. It was all he wanted and, somehow, God had made it clear to him that it would be. He was content to wait on the time and the will of God.

When the young couple brought their child to the temple, Simeon, seeing them, realised at once that here before him was the one he had waited for, and Israel had longed for for generations. He took the child in his arms and gave thanks to God:

Master, you have kept your promise, and now you can dismiss your servant in peace,  
For my eyes have seen your salvation; the work you have set up in the sight of all the  
nations,  
A light of revelation for the foreigners, and the glory of your people Israel.

(Luke 2: 29 – 32)

Simeon too expected revolutions: "This child has been appointed for the rise and fall of many in Israel" he said. He will determine careers and fates. He will be a sign contradicting the proven power of the world and all its will to enforce its way. But Simeon understood, perhaps more distinctly than Zechariah, how sharp the revolution must be when God's new order came in, and that when God's judgement fell, exposing the most secret plans and attitudes, it would cut closest to those who are closest to God. He had a prophecy for Miriam: "Your own soul will be cut thru by the sword."

The revolution is real, for the Messiah has really come. It is too real for us to manage. We can neither predict it nor control it, but God's revolution is all around us, and willy-nilly we are caught up in its struggle. We struggle to accept its victory, or we struggle to resist it. There are no other alternatives, for the Messiah has come from God with God's power and authority, and the only question is: Do we engage with that power, do we trust God and the Messiah God sends, or do we fight against them?

Do we trust, and do we believe? To engage with God is to acknowledge ourselves in God's hands, and to live accordingly. Such is the trust that meets God, and where God acts in the world, it is only by inspiring such trust. God's project for the world – a revolution – will be carried thru in people who trust him, and that trust is what we call "faith". More than believing anything about God, faith is trusting God with a heady, dangerous trust that steps out of all familiar territory and starts, for better and worse, for pain and joy and adventure, on the road of God, to live God's plan for the world.

And because it is God's plan, in which any one of us has only a part, faith has many dimensions. It is the patient waiting of Simeon, accepting that the sum total of his life will be to have waited for the light and, in the end, to have seen the Messiah. Faith is the youthful enthusiasm of Miriam, believing at God's word that in her body the world will be overturned, and her own life-plans with it. Faith is Zechariah's acceptance of rebuke and his willingness to return, even in the hardness of years, to the hope and trust of his roots. Faith, a profound trust in God, is the field in which the Messiah comes, to overturn the powers of darkness and illusion, and to shine as the light of all the nations.

Faith is not a condition, a price we pay to get God's co-operation. It is the very mode in which God works with us, inspiring us to be willingly and wholeheartedly with God. Faith is neither closing our eyes on reality nor opting for an alternative reality. Nor is it a way of bringing God under control, which doctrines and creeds might try to be, but the very response that accepts God as totally beyond our control, as the one whose coming sweeps away the illusion of being in control, even of our own world and lives. Faith is the one true response to God, for it recognises God the utterly uncontainable. By faith we step out of the fantasy that we can measure, define and control reality, to accept that Reality is God speaking to us to change and rule us. By faith we take sides in the final war between light and illusion, a revolutionary war for the world we live in, where the illusions have long held sway but now the Messiah has come.