



## Set free by the promises of God

A sermon by Revd Richard Carter

The Magnificat, the song of Mary, is the song of someone who makes herself available to God, and so it is, in many ways, the song of all of us who seek God. The acceptance of God's call becomes a song of freedom.

What was it that led you to this service tonight? Perhaps it was the music which interested you, or the memory of Advents past, the smell of winter, the hope of words and music to warm your heart and to begin your preparation for Christmas; perhaps it was something about the Christmas story which continues to touch us and draw us in, an expectancy, a hope for a truth we have glimpsed and longed to experience more fully.

How does this Advent journey begin? It begins with a mood of expectancy – the realisation that the rush, the competition, the values that surround us and bombard us, do not all add up or lead to something better and that here, deep within, deep within our very souls there is a yearning, a longing, a waiting for something more... a yearning for a deeper truth. Advent, on the surface, is the rush and excitement of preparation for an event to come, but it is also the 'here and now': the time now without which the future is impossible – like a mother or father waiting for a child to be born, waiting in hope, and fear, and anticipation, for a life to be born which will change everything – waiting for a life that has already begun within us, as pure gift.

All our passages of scripture tonight are narratives of that becoming: moments of divine recognition, call and choice, moments of calling where the presence of God's love seems to be unequivocally demanding a response. Our first reading expresses the truth that our very creation was part of that calling: our humanity formed by God, loved and blessed by God, made in God's own image, now called to take responsibility for the gifts of the earth, the soil, the sky, the sea. We have the recognition of a God who offers us the gift of our very lives but also that this is a relationship which calls for our participation. And the choices of life, the God choices, will need to be made over and over again. In our second reading we heard about the nature of that relationship of trust initiated by God, offered to us as gift, symbolised in the colours and bow of the rainbow: a relationship, a mystery beyond us, into which all are called. Then we heard of Moses' call in the revelation of the burning bush, calling us to come forward into a meeting with God on holy ground; Moses in his response and initial refusal, echoing our own human fears. He is called not into passive acceptance, but active involvement, to take part in God's plan of salvation. Then we heard the story of Naomi and Ruth, and Ruth's incredible response of faithful love mirroring God's own response and relationship with us. Ruth, the one outside the tribe, becomes the sign and example of God's unconditional love for us all: "Where you go I will go, where you lodge I will lodge, your people shall be my people, your God my God. Where you die, I will die." Then we heard the story of Isaiah's calling in the temple and that same response as Moses, as he acknowledges his own vulnerability and unworthiness: "Woe is me I am lost," he cries, "for I am a man of unclean lips" – the call of God, coupled with our own deep sense of inadequacy and failure. Overwhelmed by our own shame and sin before God and at the same time God's power cleanses and purifies, allowing us to be set free and to respond to God's call to life. "Who shall I send?" "Here I am, send me."

And finally, we reached the story of Mary. I want you to imagine the situation Mary is in. She is unmarried, she has no position, she is not described as righteous. She is pregnant, she has no

status, her reputation is at stake, her whole life is at stake. She could be rejected, even stoned. And she responds “I am the servant of the Lord, let it happen to me as you have said.” This is not a cry of submission; this is a response of incredible courage, it is her act of becoming. Those promises of God have not cowed her but set her free. “She hurries off” to visit her cousin Elizabeth – almost a hundred miles she hurries, not, it seems, in panic or in shame, but in courage and in joy. And when she meets her cousin Elizabeth, her response is to proclaim a song magnifying the greatness of the Lord. God has said to her “I want you, in your poverty, just as you are, blessed are you. You are going to be the bearer of my love.” Mary hurried off almost a hundred miles. This promise has set her free. Mary is anything but passive or submissive as she has often been portrayed. Mary will know suffering, flight, exile; she will follow her son to the cross and will witness to the resurrection. She offers both inspiration and solidarity with all those who seek to endorse the Gospels. Leonardo Boff writes ‘Christians following in the footsteps of Jesus and Mary cannot be neutral. There is no room in real life for an ethereal platonic love that is inoperative. What we need is a love in solidarity with the suffering... an intelligent, concrete love that looks for concrete, liberating steps to take in developing relationships of justice among human beings.’

Mary ‘magnifies’ God: to enlarge, to amplify, to exalt, to extol – to make great and seize the liberating power of God.

My soul magnifies the Lord. Our souls can amplify God and make him greater – God finding space in us to be exalted: God’s life, God’s justice, God’s love, magnified in our very own souls.

On Thursday of this week I had the great privilege of being invited to a day with Jean Vanier, the founder of the l’Arche Communities, which are now found in so many parts of the world. Much of his own understanding of God’s love has been the gift of those with physical and mental disability, with whom he has shared so much of his life. I wrote down everything, for though his words were simple and familiar, what he said expressed a deep truth: the truth of our own call by God, a truth I have glimpsed again and again: the truth of our own Advent, as those who have also been called by God.

Jean Vanier said “Each person is precious. Hidden under the cloak of our defensiveness and shame, is the humanity of God. God does not say “I am here to do you good”, or “I am here to judge you.” God says “I am here. I love you. You are precious in my sight, every part of you.” Do not remain in the clan, the tribe, the position of strength and power. Move from the fortress to become the fountain. Move out. Move out, set out on the journey with God. Meeting is healing. Meeting is transformation. The ‘who I am’ is fragile, the pressure to conform immense. Move from the tyranny of normalcy to the realisation that you are loved by God and can be set free by that love. We need to create a space where we can meet in truth. The place of truth is an extraordinary space. We are called to come out from behind the walls, to recognise the addictiveness of our own compulsions, our fear of humiliation, and the way we hide and defend those fears. It is a long road to freedom. The place of poverty and weakness is the place where God’s community is formed. What we will discover is not the experience of being loved because of achievement, but the experience of being loved.

The stories we have heard tonight are all the stories of the revelation of a God who accompanies us on that long path to freedom.

On the cover of your service sheet is a picture from The National Gallery by Lippi: Mary, humbled before the angel, the angel humbled before Mary, blessed by God, a golden warmth pouring down upon their heads and raising them up side by side – angel and Christ-bearer, blessed in truthful humility – raised up, set free, becoming the fountain.

Listen to those words spoken to Mary. They are spoken also to us:

You are my beloved  
The Lord is with you  
Do not be afraid  
I have chosen you to become the bearer of my love for the world.

Here am I, the servant of the Lord. Let it be to me according to your Word.