

THE MAGNIFICAT IV: HE, REMEMBERING HIS MERCY

Today we come to the fourth and final strophe of the Magnificat. Hitherto we have considered, first, Mary's outpouring of praise to God, "My soul doth magnify the Lord," second, her thoughts of God's Might, Holiness and Mercy, and, third, her reflections on the great reversal of human affairs that will come about through God's mighty act of redemption. In all of this Mary's song has drawn exclusively upon Old Testament language and imagery. That is natural because it was on the writings and teaching of what we call the Old Testament that she had been raised. Her soul was drenched in traditional Jewish piety. It was the very air she breathed. We should not expect otherwise. Furthermore, this new thing that had happened to her, the beginnings of this unprecedented new life within her—wondrous in its means of conception, wondrous in its promise—Mary has barely begun to grasp. Indeed, she hardly knows how to speak of it, let alone describe it. In response to the angel's first words she could only say, "How can *this* be?" . . . "this." Upon the completion of the angel's message, she in her astonishment could still only refer to it as 'it': "Be *it* unto me according to your word." With some few days to reflect further upon all of this by the time she visited Elizabeth, she can still only manage to speak of "the great things" he who is mighty has done unto her. It was to require the entire lifetime of her Son for her to fully grasp it as she learned of him through the events that surrounded his birth, through those that filled the so-called hidden years, through the oft-confusing way he related to her during his public ministry, and lastly through the crucible of his passion and the miracle of his resurrection and ascension. Her learning of 'this new thing' that God was doing in and through her was a life-long process, as it is for us. So it is not surprising that the song she sang at the beginning in the presence of her cousin Elizabeth should have been framed solely in the language of the familiar Old Covenant.

But Mary's interpretation of what God had done/was doing in terms of the Old Covenant was not just a convenience, not simply the using of the vocabulary and thought-forms that happened to be at hand. No, it was precisely in terms of the Old

Covenant that this new thing was to be understood before it could ever be grasped as a New Covenant. So Mary in the last lines of the Magnificat points up the background and context against which the great things that the almighty had done were to be understood. The new thing was really the flowering and fulfillment of the old:

He remembering his mercy
 Hath holpen his servant Israel,
 As he promised to our forefathers,
 Abraham and his seed, forever.

I.

I don't know why the version of the Magnificat with which we are most familiar, that of the classic *Book of Common Prayer*, should have stood this first verse on its head in terms of syntax or word order. The wording of the sentence in the original and in most translations puts the subject and the verb at the beginning of the sentence: "He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy" (R.S.V.). But the BCP puts the cause before the action, quite happily I think: "He[,] remembering his mercy[,] hath holpen his servant Israel." The Old Testament spoke often of God's remembering his mercy. Psalm 98 stated, "He hath remembered his mercy and his truth towards the house of Israel" (Ps. 98:3). We should note, however, that as with the earlier words of the Magnificat which spoke of the arm of God, this language is anthropomorphic, that it, its uses human terms to speak of God, not because they are true or adequate, but because that is the only language we can understand. As God is not a man so as to have arms and legs, so he is not a man that he should 'forget' and then 'remember.' Indeed, since God is above and beyond time and space there is no 'then' and 'now' with him, no past, present and future. All is eternally present in a way of which we simply cannot conceive. But since we can only think in terms of time and space, the word of God accommodates itself to our finitude. The important thing is that this wondrous deed accomplished by the Holy Spirit in the womb of the lovely virgin, and all the glorious out-workings of God's redemption of which Mary has so aptly sung, have their root and cause in the mercy of God. We understand full well what Mary means when she says, "He remembering his mercy." The scenes of the Annunciation by the Angel and the Visitation to Elizabeth are grounded in this unfathomable mercy.

II.

“He remembering his mercy hath holpen his servant Israel.” I am also glad that the Prayer Book version of the canticle retains the old word ‘holpen.’ It is all too easy when we read in other versions that God has ‘helped’ his servant Israel to think of that in terms that do not measure up to the profundity of the meaning of what God has done/is doing for us in Christ. You and I help one another in various ways that are meaningful and good, but wholly unworthy to be compared with what God has done. The meaning of the Greek word is to “lay hold of in order to *support* and *succour*.”¹ It refers to what Zachariah said in the Benedictus: “He hath raised up a mighty salvation for us.” I think the unusual word ‘holpen’ is a better choice to remind us of that. It is interesting that when J. S. Bach comes the phrase in his Magnificat in D, “He remembering his mercy hath holpen his servant Israel,” he assigns the line to a trio of feminine voices, which, as someone observed, might put one in mind of the three Mary’s at the foot of the cross.² That surely captures the meaning both of God’s mercy and of his help.

One further note before we pass to the last phrase of the canticle. God’s merciful help is to his servant Israel. Israel is to be understood, as we shall see in a moment, as referring not to physical Israel, but to all those who believe and are thus part of the true Israel, the Church, which, as St. Paul will describe it in his Epistle to the Ephesians, includes Jews and Gentiles. But what is notable here is that Mary describes this true Israel with a very similar term to that which she used of herself earlier. She speaks of “his *servant* Israel” in the same manner that she spoke of herself as the Lord’s ‘*handmaiden*.’ God manifests his power to the lowly and the powerless. It is the hungry that he fills. So God manifests his mercy to his servants, his handmaidens, to those who acknowledge his Lordship and wait humbly for him. As Mary said earlier, “His mercy is on them that fear him.” Martin Luther commented, “Here all merit and presumption are brought low, and God’s grace and mercy alone are exalted.”³

¹ Alfred Plummer, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel according to S. Luke (International Critical Commentary)*, 4th edn. (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1901), p. 33.

² Samuel Terrien, *The Magnificat: Musicians As Biblical Interpreters* (New York: Paulist Press, 1995), p. 69.

³ Martin Luther, “The Magnificat” in *Luther’s Works*, vol. 21, ed. by Jaroslav Pelikan, (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1956), p. 351.

III.

In the last line of her song Mary points us to the promises of God that go back to the Father of Faith, Abraham. The unhappy story of the first 11 chapters of the Book of Genesis tell of the entrance of sin onto the human stage and of its spread and consequences, a story that is told in abbreviated form in the Festival of Nine Lessons and Carols, which we will hear this afternoon. Then in Genesis chapter 12 the Lord says to Abraham, “Get thee out of thy country and from thy kindred, . . . unto a land that I will shew thee: and I will make of thee a great nation, and I will bless thee and make thy name great; and thou shalt be a blessing” (Gen. 12:1-2). A little later God reiterates that he has made his covenant with Abraham and his seed throughout all generations (Gen. 17:12). We can trace throughout the Old Testament in the generations that followed, the longing of the people of God, amidst their checkered past, for the fulfillment of God’s promise, “the hopes and fears of all the years.” All of that long history of anticipation leads us from Abraham to Mary and to that child to be born of her. As Samuel Terrien put it, “In the conception of the Holy Child, the long history of God’s yearning for all his children on earth comes to its supreme moment.”⁴

By tracing the promises of God back to Abraham and his seed, Mary makes clear a line of thinking that will be very important to St. Paul and through him to all Christians. God promised to Abraham that through him and his seed all the nations of the earth would be blessed, and St. Paul, particularly in his letter to the Galatians, stresses that this promise, which was made 400 years before the giving of the Law through Moses, is meant to include Gentiles as well. He writes, “Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law, having become a curse for us—for it is written, ‘Cursed be every one who hangs on a tree’—that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come upon the Gentiles, that we might receive the promise of the Spirit through faith” (Gal. 3:13-14). He then refers to the very promise God made to Abraham and his seed to which Mary pointed and says, “Now the promises were made to Abraham and his offspring. It does not say, ‘And to his offsprings,’ referring to many; but referring to one, ‘And to his offspring,’ which is Christ” (Gal. 3:16).

⁴ Samuel Terrien, *op. cit.*, p. 66.

So Mary, while she still does not fully comprehend the angel's message or the miracle that has taken place within her, and while she is still limited to the language of the Old Covenant, which is all she knows, calls to mind the promises made to Abraham and his seed, not knowing that Abraham's truest seed (in the singular as St. Paul points out) is the Christ who lives even then in her womb. That seed, even Jesus Christ, is the seed of the woman spoken of in Genesis chapter three, that will fatally wound the serpent's head and bring redemption to the human race.

IV.

So Mary has reason enough to magnify the Lord, to rejoice in God her Saviour. And we have reason enough to take her words on our lips and to let her song enter deep within our hearts, for the great things the Mighty One did for her he did for us as well. And because she was his ready instrument, we do not hesitate to call her blessed and seek to imitate her humility, her faith, . . . and her praise.

One last word in this regard. Even though Mary did not fully grasp the significance of the great thing God was doing and even though she had no other means to express it than those words and images in which ancient Israel had voiced its faith for centuries, we who hear her song and take it on our lips are blessed with a fuller understanding of these things and have a broader knowledge of their true context and content. And so we, who are not so limited as Mary, can point to the fullest implication of her message, and we do so when we add to its concluding words, as the Church always does, the Trinitarian doxology:

Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Ghost;
As it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be, world without end.
Amen.

It is interesting that C.P.E. Bach, who opens his setting of the Magnificat with an exuberant and joyous theme played by trumpets and strings, reintroduces that vibrant theme when he takes up the Doxology at the end. Thus is our response, "Glory be to the Father, Son and Holy Ghost," seen as of a piece with Mary's "My soul doth magnify the Lord." Her "*Magnificat anima mea Dominum*," is echoed in our, "*Gloria Patri et Filio et Spiritui Sancte*."

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