

Good morning everyone

The Magnificat

One of the most famous passages in the Bible

It's famous, it's beautiful, it's profound, and it's loud! My soul magnifies the Lord – that's loud! We will sing that loudness and that praise of God in just a short while.

But. Let's be honest. The Magnificat is also darn uncomfortable! If we dare to examine it in any detail.

Let's have a look at that troublesome middle section:

God is a warrior! And He is on the warpath.

And because God is God, He will always win the fight.

Proud people will be scattered far and wide – not by physical force – but by the contrivances of their own hearts.

Their own, secret, selfish thoughts will be their undoing. No other help needed. And God will do this.

People who have status and social power; in politics, in the workplace, in society, are all in for a nasty shock. Because God will knock them off their pedestals, and replace them with the nobodies; the people of no account. At least, no account in the eyes of this world.

The poor are going to be fed by God Himself with good things. And the rich get a double whammy: they will not be fed by God, He will starve them of good things, and, worst of all, unlike the poor, they will be sent away, empty, from His wonderful presence. Punishment indeed.

So, what on earth is going on here? This feels not just uncomfortable, it feels positively revolutionary.

And let's be honest, we don't like it uncomfortable. Most of us prefer calm and order and a safe place in an ordered society, and a pair of carpet slippers, and an open fire, and a house called Rose Cottage.

But the trouble is, God will not have it so.

God is on the march, His kingdom is coming, bringing unsettling change, and demanding a personal response from all of us.

George Verwer, the founder of OM (Operation Mobilisation) once said: "When I feed the poor, they call me a saint. But when I ask why are they poor, they call me a Communist!"

And you are probably now saying, Rutton, for goodness sake, it's Advent Four. We have the Omicron Variant, yet another Boris Christmas party that never happened and did not break any rules, in some Kafka-esque way anyway, we can't get to France for Christmas, we can't visit Aunty Flo in the nursing home, and these darn masks may as well be sewn onto our faces. Haven't we got enough division in society to contend without you turning Marxist!

And the answer is yes.

Yes, we have enough to contend with – not yes, I'm going to turn Marxist!

So, I am going to try and put the social challenge of the Magnificat into its true, overarching context.

The true context of the Magnificat is not social revolution. It is unfettered, unbounded praise in relationship.

When Christmas comes around, and I start to receive those unwelcome, self-congratulatory round robin letters from distant friends, it seems to me those friends divide into two camps. The friendships that lasted, and the friendships that didn't.

Some did not last because we all changed over the years.

But more positively, they were plenty of friendships that did last. These are the people who put you first.

Because they really care about you and your welfare. They are excited to be with you. And that is true friendship indeed.

When we look at this passage, the Magnificat, and the Virgin Mary's relationship with God, we seem to be looking at the second type of friendship.

The sort of friendship that exults in the other person, that that rejoices in them, the sort of relationship you can always trust.

Friends like that are giving.

Unselfish, humble, and giving.

Luke chapter 1 verse 46 says "My soul magnifies the Lord and by spirit rejoices in God my saviour." It's hard to translate this explosion of praise and joy into English.

A better translation might be: "Tell out my soul the greatness of our God." That would be the sense here.

But Mary is not in a strong or comfortable position in life to praise God – in fact, she's in a highly dangerous and volatile position.

So, why this explosion of trust and praise in the middle of the greatest danger and calamity?

How does Mary do it? How does she give thanks in adversity?

Let's go back a step. What do we know about Mary?

Well, as far as praise in danger are concerned, plenty:

Mary is a remarkably strong character. She is a survivor. Right at the very start of her young and inexperienced gospel career, she survives two major life crises:

First, Joseph, in Matthew's Gospel, plans to divorce her from the engagement. That would leave her cruelly exposed, and pregnant, and friendless and without income.

Fortunately, we know that that didn't happen but only because of divine intervention.

Secondly, she survives the murderous onslaught of King Herod, and she and the child miraculously escape unharmed. A good many did not.

Mary is a survivor, and a strong character. That does not always come over in some of the traditional art and icons.

And you might say well that's very interesting but what has that got to do with us? Good on her if she was a courageous, if she was a faithful and intelligent person, if she was a survivor, but how does that help us?

Well, I think we go back to my comments about friendship. Let's say, sake of argument, that there are two types of friend. There might even be two types of people.

The people who turn inward, and say me me me, and the people who turn outward, even when there is a problem in life, and put you first.

This is not a lady who is looking inwards, and saying me me me, as so many now do in our society.

This is a lady who is looking outwards and rejoicing in God in spite of the difficult circumstances. And that takes courage, and humility, and true relationship.

Humility to set ourselves aside, and to magnify God and not our problems.

And she refers to herself as humble, that is, not of high social account.

And you might say, well, that sounds like hard work. It's hard work not to consider yourself, and be humble all the time, and go around like some sort of Anglican Uriah Heap, putting the interests of others, and the praise of God, first.

Perhaps secretly you don't really feel like doing that!

It's not a natural instinct, I'm afraid, to praise God first.

But I just wonder if good things can happen if we can do it. If we can come out of ourselves, and put God first in spite of our circumstances, in spite of our difficulties and predicaments. Because then, we are changed.

Prayer changes us. Praising God changes us. That has been my experience, the experience of millions of Christians, and I hope, your experience also.

That is not to underestimate life's difficulties. Mary was up against it in a very real way in terms of her relationships, in terms of her social standing, and in terms of her safety. In Luke Ch 1, her future looks highly uncertain compared to the perfect happy normal married life. No Rose Cottage on the horizon, I am afraid, for her or the child.

But the real joy of the Magnificat is that she reacts to the news with praise.

So certain is she of her standing with God, that she cannot help but put God first, and herself second, and find security and fulfilment in relationship with Him.

We can all do the same when troubles come.

Prayer changes us.

Praise changes us.

It changes perspective. It raises us up to sit in heavenly places, where we can enjoy both friendship with God, and a better perspective of our problems.

That's my challenge to myself for next week, and next year. Please join me in my Magnificat challenge.

When things get tough – let our souls tell out the praises of our God.

Amen