

Mary's Song: A Model for Worship

Follow as I read the passage called "The Magnificat," a title derived from the Latin, "manificare," a translation from the Greek of the first word in Mary's Song. The Angel Gabriel had announced to her that she had been chosen to give birth to "the Son of the Most High" (1:32). Her response of willingness to believe and to submit to this special mission gives us an example for our faith. Today we'll note how Mary is an example as a worshiper. After the angel left Mary, she made a 50-70 mile journey to visit her relative Elizabeth, who was pregnant with John the Baptist, for a joyful celebration.

Reading **Luke 1: 46-56:**

⁴⁶ *And Mary said,*

"My soul magnifies the Lord,

⁴⁷ *and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,*

⁴⁸ *for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant.*

Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed;

⁴⁹ *for the Mighty One has done great things for me,
and holy is his name.*

⁵⁰ *His mercy is for those who fear him
from generation to generation.*

⁵¹ *He has shown strength with his arm;
he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.*

⁵² *He has brought down the powerful from their thrones,
and lifted up the lowly;*

⁵³ *he has filled the hungry with good things,
and sent the rich away empty.*

⁵⁴ *He has helped his servant Israel,
in remembrance of his mercy,*

⁵⁵ *according to the promise he made to our ancestors,
to Abraham and to his descendants forever."*

⁵⁶ *And Mary remained with her about three months and then returned to her home.*

The birth and infancy narratives in Matthew and Luke's Gospels are colored with the look of worship. In Luke we see Mary and Elizabeth at worship over the announcement of Mary's virgin conception. Then we note the worship of the angels in the heavenly host on the night of the Savior's birth. The newborn King is then worshiped by Mary and Joseph, and then joined by the angels in heavenly chorus, who announce Jesus' birth to the shepherds, who join in worship. Later on, the Wise Men, Magi from the east come a great distance to worship this child King, as we see in Matthew's Gospel. Luke also shows us the worship of aged and devout Simeon and Anna, who receive the young child Jesus when he is brought to the temple for the ritual of purification (2:21-38).

Yet there is no clearer example in worship than that of young Mary. Just as she modeled faith and surrender to God's will, she also shows us the essence of worship.

Our English word is from the Old English, "weorthscipe," meaning worth-ship. In our worship we acknowledge the worth of someone or something by giving our honor and reverent esteem. In Scripture worship means literally to prostrate oneself before God and to offer him reverent praise and total obeisance. Worship in Scripture is always a matter of the heart and is to be contrasted from the false, insincere worship of mere ritual and outward show. Worship of God is both a personal and a corporate experience. When one comes into a relationship with God, he or she immediately becomes a worshiper of God, and all false idols are to be rejected.

Worship is both corporate and personal. It begins with a personal relationship with God and is an experience designed to be shared with others in corporate assembly. There is power in the corporate gathering that cannot be experienced alone. And authentic corporate worship nurtures the soul that also worships God in secret, reading and applying the Scriptures and praying on a daily and regular basis. The worshipful life is one lived in the spirit of prayer and as a prayer and also as an act of worship. I think this is what Paul is referring to, a life that is presented to God as a daily sacrifice and that becomes a "spiritual act of worship" (Rom. 12:1).

You and I were created and redeemed to be worshipers. Knowing that purpose and calling, we do well to look to the model that Mary gives us in our text. The first word in Mary's Song gives its title. The Greek work, "megaluo," is "to praise, glorify, or make bigger." We cannot change God's intrinsic greatness, but our worship and focus on him gives us a better and clearer apprehension of his greatness. God is Mary's focus in her worship.

Mary shows that she was not unschooled in the Scriptures, but rather, even with her humble station in life, was informed about God as her Savior and the Mighty One. She knew about his power and holiness, his mercy, grace and his righteousness that was working in behalf of the humble. She understood that the coming of the Messiah, conceived by the Holy Spirit within her womb, would mean the great reversal and overthrow of an unjust world system under Satan's influence. Our worship too must be informed by the Word of God and be based upon who God is. It was Mary's focus on the greatness of God that enabled her to realize her own humble position of total dependence on him. She realized her personal unworthiness, yet also was stirred to think how God had blessed and exalted her to be his servant. Worship that focuses on God indeed puts us in our place before God, as Isaiah well knew (Is. 6:5).

I recall a visit many years ago to the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem, built over the putative cite where Jesus was born. To enter than church building, we

had to stoop over to enter the door. The entrances were made lower, so that only men and not horses could enter. We were told that this was to keep mounted troops during the Crusades from riding into the church sanctuary. I thought, this is not a bad reminder—to enter worship having stooped over, having expressed our humility before God.

Mary exulted in what the Lord had done for her. Worship will never come alive for us unless and until we have experienced his grace in our lives and then respond in gratitude for him. This is why worship is the preoccupation of heaven, all the people and angels whose lives have been transformed by grace. Mary's Song was not just about what God had done for her. Mary was rejoicing in what God had already done for his people. But now, in the light of the coming Messiah, she was rejoicing in what he was going to do for them. In good prophetic style, she spoke of what was yet to be in the prophetic past tense, as though it had already happened. Her worship was a celebration of what God would yet do for his people. Our worship is done with the reminder of God's great worldwide communion. Worship demands a spirit of unity with other believers; else we are denying the intention of God to gather his church universal into perfect union.

Mary had been visited by the angel Gabriel, and no doubt that was a terrifying yet glorious experience. But his words of assurance and calm gave her peace, and she responded to the stupendous news with faith and surrender. The good news was that the Holy Spirit would conceive within her womb the God-Man, who would be her Savior and the Redeemer/Rescuer of all who would believe in him. Imagine now as she worships, she realizes the Savior of the world is developing in her womb!

And yet we too are privileged to host the Holy Spirit of God, who is as much God as is the Son and the Father. Is not this too great for us to fathom? God is not only with us—he is within us. What a difference there would be if we but practiced his presence within us! This joy should be expressed in our worship singing, clapping, and freedom to even shout an occasional "Hallelujah!" should the Spirit so prompt. But this joy is not just expressed in corporate celebration, but is expressed in the quietness of our hearts, even during some dark moments of life when we also affirm the presence of the Holy One within our hearts. God desires our fellowship and commands our rejoicing always.

This is a source of great joy that endures when happiness is out of reach. Even when life's troubles seem to overwhelm us, we can and must have the confidence that God is in control. I received an e-mail from a fellow pastor in Belgium who shared that he has just been diagnosed with cancer and this on the heels of his wife's long-standing bout with the same disease. His message, however, brimmed with confidence in the sovereign care of God. This confidence came after a sleepless night of seeking the Lord and discovering anew the promises of God. This good man could affirm that God is never

surprised by the events that rock us, and he is always working for our eternal good and his glory.

And so there should be the element of true joy. In one of the few directly Christmas sermons ever preached by CH Spurgeon (his being an “heir of the Puritans caused him to look askance at celebrations that had pagan associations), he commented on the greeting “Merry Christmas” as being entirely appropriate for us believers. It’s because of the joy of salvation made possible by the Incarnation, cross and resurrection of Christ that we can have true joy and merriment, at Christmastime and all of the time.

If we but realized what God has done for us in even the little, unseen acts of God’s secret providence, protection and care, we’d be moved to more heartfelt worship. Mary’s worship made God greater in her eyes. God is great, regardless of our acknowledgment or our ignorance or oblivion. Whether we believe in and worship him or reject him does not add to or detract from his incomparable greatness. But our worship helps to magnify him in our perception, just as our mindlessness and failure to worship him is a cause of our faltering in faith and poverty of worship.

And we must treasure and guard the opportunities we are given for worship with the people of God, whereby we encourage one another and also receive a word from God’s word read, sung, taught and preached. The worshipful life, as was true of Mary’s is one that has a kingdom perspective. The psalmist was discouraged when he lost the kingdom perspective and was focusing on the bad things that happen to good people and how bad people sometimes seem to have a better time of it. But when he went to worship, his head was cleared and his thoughts redirected to a fresh kingdom of God perspective on things (Ps. 73:16-17).

Mary was given the Spirit to see kingdom reality, how that through the Child to be born from her womb there would be a great reversal of the world order. It would be God’s revolution, not the kind that the world tries to pull off. The crowds and even the disciples at times, it seems, wanted Jesus to use his powers to overthrow the occupying Romans and establish an immediate rule that would eliminate all society inequities and create a utopia on earth. But Mary knew that there was something greater and more profound at work within her womb. There was to be born a Man who would create a great reversal of reality. Yes, Jesus would show that we are to care for the needs of the poor. Often it is the materially poor who are most cognizant of their spiritual poverty. And Jesus showed his compassion for the hungry multitudes, which he fed miraculously in two occasions that we know about. But Jesus also used those occasions to show their need to experience him as the Bread of Life, who could alone satisfy the deepest longs of their hearts and give them the true life of God (Jn. 6).

The reversal Mary talks about in her worship is one that indeed threatens the overthrow, not just of governments. Jesus wants to change hearts and call people to follow him as Lord. We're part, not of just any "old" revolution. We're part of a great reversal that threatens to turn upside down (shall we not rather say, "right side up"?) an entire way of thinking and living, whatever the country or government where we live.

David Read says that Mary's words are terrifying because they speak of God's true revolution, one that will totally condemn every human pretension, arrogance, acquisitiveness and pride. Worship that Mary models for us is done in confidence that God is at work to bring his kingdom to earth as it exists in heaven. There will be a complete reversal on that day when "every knee shall bow... and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father" (Phil. 2:10-11).

Following his seminary years, my late older brother entered the priesthood of the Episcopal Church. I recall the sermon given at his ordination, delivered by the bishop in Grand Rapids, Michigan. The bishop shares from a conversation with a prominent businessman who had moved to a certain city in the bishop's diocese. This influential related to the bishop his efforts to decide on which church to attend, since he was moving to an area that seemed to give him more than one option among the Episcopal churches. He had visited two different churches, and both priests paid a lot of attention to him, being aware that his wealth and influence would be a strong asset to their churches. After listening to the second priest extol the virtues of his church, such as their varied ministries, vibrant music program and dynamic youth minister who was sure to please the layman's teenage children, the layman asked a question that stopped the priest in his tracks. "When I worship at your church Sunday after Sunday," asked the layman, "Will I meet God there?"

Worship is all about meeting God, and when we meet him in his holiness and glory, we are to express to him, like Mary, our joy and our praise. As worship leaders, minister, liturgists and musicians, we are to lead you in that experience. But you must be eager to meet him, and involved, through your listening, praying hearing, singing to meet God. And when you meet him, he will change your life.