

The Sign of Justice: God Rules

sermon digest

December 12, 2010

Luke 1:46-55

larry dipboye

Mary's song, the "Magnificat," is a revolutionary bombshell, a cry for justice in a time of oppression for a fair distribution of wealth and power in a land flowing with milk and honey. We tend to miss the implication of social revolution in the stereotype of little Mary, meek and submissive to authority. For a period in the 1980's, the Guatemalan government banned Mary's song from public reading because of its politically subversive content. They feared that a song about bringing down the rich and the powerful in order to provide good things for the poor just might incite violence. People in poverty might hear it literally. Some poor soul might take it seriously.

Matthew and Luke tell somewhat different stories about the birth of Jesus, or at least the same story from totally different points of view. On one simple fact, however, they are in complete agreement: when Jesus was born, Herod was king of Judea. That simple fact has been a key to determining the date of birth. The birth of Jesus had to have come in or before the year of Herod's death. John Dominic Crossan (*God and Empire*, p. 109ff) believes Jesus was born in the year of Herod's death. It was also the year the Romans came to Nazareth. The death of Herod sparked the flames of revolution across the land. Three Roman legions assigned to guard the northeastern border had to be redeployed into Jewish territory to put down riots, putting the frontier at risk as well as infuriating the Syrian governor Varus.

Jesus grew up in Nazareth, a tiny village about four miles from Sepphoris. In 4 BCE the insurgent Judas raided royal arsenals and used the weapons to attack Roman targets. Varus sent a Roman detachment into Galilee to root out the problem. The Romans engaged Judas in Sepphoris and burned the city. Inhabitants who were not killed were enslaved. Crossan speculates that all of this took place in the year of Jesus' birth and that occupants of nearby Nazareth who could not hide or escape would have been raped, enslaved, and/or killed.

At some given moment in the youth of Mary's boy, Crossan imagines, Mary would have walked him to the top of the ridge within view of Sepphoris and told about the year of the Romans, the year of his birth. What, then, did the young man decide about God, about dealing with Rome and violence and the possibility of resistance? Thus came "the Kingdom of God" in the preaching of Jesus, what Crossan calls the "Great Divine Cleanup." "The Kingdom was what this world would look like if and when God sat on Caesar's throne, or if and when God lived in Antipas's palace. . . . The Kingdom of God is about the Will of God for this earth here below"⁽¹¹⁶⁻¹¹⁷⁾.

The coming of God is connected to the establishment of justice. I don't know that Mary was the source of the central theme in the preaching of Jesus, but we could safely assume that the ideas proclaimed in the song of Mary and the call to justice in the preaching of Jesus grew out of the same social context. Political persecution and economic injustice lay at the foundation of Roman rule, the kingdom of Caesar. The Magnificat does not sound like the voice of a terrified pregnant teenager, not even an out-of-bounds defiant teen. It is more like the deep, determined moan of a seasoned elder who has never known a day without hunger, fear, or despair. The one persistent complaint of Mary about Herod's rule in Caesar's world that sounds like a teenager is the familiar cry, "It's not fair!"

Raymond Brown (*Birth of the Messiah*, 328ff) located the source of Mary's song in the probable community from which she came, the Anawim, the "poor ones." They were people who had no other recourse, no other hope, than the intervening salvation of a just God. The rule of men both Jewish and Gentile had been tried again and again with the repetition of the same inequality and oppression. Both Matthew and Luke were fully aware of the politics of their age—the economic realities, human oppression, the hopes and dreams of the occupied province of Judea. They addressed the same kind of issues that we see daily in evening news, the same issues being debated in the U.S. Congress and discussed at the local Starbucks or buzzing around the tables on Wednesday evening at Grace Covenant Church.

To burrow into the issues of virginal conception, reversal of menopause, and revelations from angels without consideration of the political firestorm raging in Palestine is a gross misunderstanding of the story. Mary's song expressed the dream of her people. Had you asked the person on the street in Jerusalem, "What is the deepest longing of your heart?" you probably would have heard something

like Mary's song. The people longed for a better world, for a level playing field, for an opportunity to live—something the founding fathers of this country called “the right of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness”—in a word, JUSTICE. The same dream can be found on the bottom rungs of the social ladder in every age; it is the longing of the impoverished masses in India and Darfur or Appalachia and Hell's Kitchen today.

My first year in seminary, we joined a church near the school that was heavily populated with fellow students. Toward the end of the first semester, I was one of two students chosen to preach on Seminary Sunday. I carefully considered the need of the day, weighed all of the possible messages available to us in the Holy Scriptures, took note of the seasonal focus and the purpose of the special recognition of students, then I chose my text to address the need of the hour—the rich young ruler. My fellow student preached on Sunday evening. His careful deliberation led to a sermon on rich little Zacchaeus, probably his only sermon as well. Someone observed that we really clobbered the wealthy that day. Indeed we did, and with good reason. Seminary students were mostly poor. We were friends of Mary, the Anawim of God.

Humanity is in need of divine guidance. Jürgen Moltmann called him the “disarming child,” the child of Isaiah 9 on whose shoulders the government shall rest and of whose kingdom shall be peace rooted in justice and righteousness for evermore. A fragile, helpless infant seems incongruent with the call to reorder the pecking order of the world, but the truth of history is that no form of government yet devised has accomplished the ideal of “liberty and justice for all.”

The missing element in Mary's song is the political promise of painless prosperity. In order to bring hope to the poor and the oppressed, the rich and the powerful will be brought down. The conception of Jesus was the hope of the world. The might of God was revealed, scattering the proud, bringing down the powerful from their thrones, lifting up the lowly, filling the hungry, while sending the rich away empty. Justice comes with a price, a redistribution of wealth. That sounds good if you have little or nothing. It sounds threatening if you happened to live among the moneyed elite of the world.

The songs of Mary and Zachariah may well have come from battle hymns sung during the Maccabean revolution. Maybe that is the source of our squirming response to Mary's song. Is a bloody revolution the way to peace on earth? It never has been and most likely never will be. Is our hope for world justice in government, in voluntary charity from the haves to the have-nots, or from a new order anchored in the rule of God?

Karl Marx thought that he could reinvent the social framework of humanity with a rigidly enforced system of government. We do not have to be reminded that the most oppressive political systems of our age were rooted in Marxist philosophy. Marx had a noble idea; it just didn't work. I would venture an opinion about his weakness. The rejection of religion as the opium of the people led to a simplistic blindness to a basic consideration of human nature in Jewish-Christian faith. People are basically flawed. We call it *sin*. People are corruptible, human governments are inadequate even in communism. The violent revolution of the proletariat workers against the bourgeoisie privileged never really happened; and, if it had, it would not have changed the human tendency to abuse wealth and power. Instead of a classless society we get a new bourgeoisie. The communist classless society did little more than rearranged the furniture in the age-old problem of injustice. Has any system of government in this world fulfilled the vision of Mary?

Marxism has failed. What about the rest of us? Winston Churchill was credited with the judgment, “Democracy is the worst form of government except for all the others.” We live with the persistent truth that all government fails, our government fails, to establish social justice in the land. We desperately need to look in the mirror of the socio-economic reality of our age. Relative to the extreme poverty of Haiti, India, or Pakistan, we are the rich and the powerful sitting on the thrones of our possessions.

Handel had a vision of the ultimate rule of God in this world in the word of the Apocalypse, Revelation 11:15: “The kingdoms of this world are become the kingdoms of our Lord, and of his Christ; and he shall reign for ever and ever.”