

Luke 1:39-55 My Soul Magnifies the Lord . . .
December 19, 2021

In the days of the monarchies, when the world was governed by kings, and power and wealth were handed down from one generation to the next by the right of primogeniture, people were valued primarily according to what they inherited at birth. Nowadays, the power of inheritance has been diminished by more egalitarian concerns.

So in the age of democracies, when part of the world is governed by presidents and prime ministers and legislatures, a person is valued according to the contribution they can make to the larger whole. Some like to say that America is a meritocracy. We are shifting from a set of principles and systems that value people according to their inherited status regardless of what they can do, to a set of principles and systems that value people based on what they can do regardless of what they have inherited. While this description of things is an oversimplification, it is generally true.

We might like to say that the present method is better than the previous one. But we are forced to the conclusion that neither passes biblical muster. Although the Bible was written in the age of dynastic empires, it always judges the political and social order. We remember what the prophet Samuel told the Israelites when they asked for a king; he told them not to do it, that they would end up oppressed.

In the Bible, a person's value is dependent neither on their inheritance or merit, but simply, in the sight of God. It is a standard that no human society has ever achieved completely.

While the Christmas story is told by and for people in the ancient world where something like a Bill of Rights was not on anyone's mind, one can see that God's way of assessing a person's worth is different. The great example of the day is Mary, the young girl chosen to be the mother of the Messiah. In the Magnificat, as it is called, this hymn in Luke's gospel, Mary recognizes that God has acted according to a different set of values, "My Soul magnifies the Lord, my spirit rejoices in God my savior. For God has been mindful of the humble state of his servant."

That is, she is a nobody. She is nobody because she is a woman, and a young one at that; she is nobody because she is Jewish, and a Galilean one at that, she is a nobody, because she is poor. *She is somebody* because God has chosen her. "From now on all generations will call me blessed." For this reason Mary breaks out into praise.

Human beings have created a common life together, with many inequities and distortions in it, ironies and contradictions in it, violence. In the realm of God, these have been removed. That means two things for us. First, it means that because of our faith that God has loved us, we are to spend our lives trying, with God's help, to better ourselves. Second, it means that because God also loves the world, we are right to

spend our lives striving for better realities in the world, in terms of how we view ourselves, how we treat others, and how we organize our relationships with those whom we have no acquaintance, in ways that better reflect these higher values.

For in the scheme of God, according to the Gospel of Luke, it is the humble who receive God's favor: "He has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts, lifted up the humble, he has filled the hungry with good things, sent the rich away empty."

Why did God choose Mary for his honor? The answer is not given, just, "You are highly favored, the Lord is with you." The implication is that she was chosen by God's Grace and not because of anything in her own character or behavior, or anything she brought into this life by way of inheritance. It was an expression of Divine Love.

Love is the Advent word for the day, and of course it brings many things to mind. Anyone who has ever encountered a Hallmark Christmas movie knows that it is often associated with romance, or family, but that is not really what is meant here. And it is easy to think of the kind of love that happens between friends, even though friends do not always use the word love to describe their relationships, sometimes they do.

What is expressed here is something less worldly and more majestic than all that. God's love is not based on social status or beauty or merit. It does not ask for anything in return. Among people it is rarely achieved,

but for God it is standard operating procedure. To that kind of love that we have been called. With that kind of love, like Mary, have been loved.

So when Mary, though she was very young at the time, realized that she had been encountered by God, she did what we might also do if we could find the words, she broke out into a song of lyrical praise. And if we are not up to our own words, we can use hers, at least for this one day. What she seems to have felt most powerfully is that if she was a nobody in the down-to-earth Roman, Galilean scheme of things, she was a somebody to God, who was mindful of her humble state. And God is also mindful of ours, each of us.

What can one do by way of response?

To begin, praise

To go further, obey by devoting ourselves, faithfully striving to make our lives and our world better

To go even further, allow God's love to at least begin to become our love, to shape our character, to govern our lives. Let us begin with the praise part;

My soul magnifies the Lord, my spirit rejoices in God my savior . . . (Repeat) for God has been mindful of the humble state of his servants.

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