

## **"Here I am, the servant of the Lord"**

One of the sayings in the gospels, from Jesus, is, "Blessed are those who take no offence at me."

Now, in our reading from Luke's gospel, our gospel reading, there seems to be very little to cause offence. Here we have two women with their children, or the potential of their children. In fact, Luke's gospel is constructed in such a way that we hear of the annunciation of the birth of John the Baptist, then the same for Jesus; and then we hear of the actual birth of John the Baptist; and then we hear of the birth of Jesus. And, in the pattern that is created, there, of course, is an emphasis on Jesus as the greater one—greater than John the Baptist.

Whatever else we could say about the women, they do, in a way, represent the Old Testament and New Testament. We know, from the passage in Luke's gospel, that Elizabeth and Zechariah were a couple associated with the priestly house of Levi. So, it was in the temple that Zechariah had his vision, his revelation, that he was to call his son, John. He wasn't aware he was going to have a son. After all, those two were in old age, and did not expect children. But, just like the people of Israel themselves, who had not had a prophet for ages, there was going to be this one final prophet who would come and prepare the way of the Lord—John the Baptist.

As for Mary, by contrast, there is no lineage spoken of in Luke's gospel for her. She is from Nazareth, a little town in Galilee. So there is nothing to draw attention to her background. She represents something—a reality—which is quite new; although she is a young Jewish woman or girl. There is no emphasis in Luke's gospel on her lineage—unlike for John Baptist, from Zechariah and Elizabeth.

When Mary first receives the announcement from the angel Gabriel, she is, of course, astonished. But she receives the message about what her son is to be—including, that he is to reign on the throne of David; and his kingdom will last forever. In chapter two, of Luke's gospel, we learn, in the announcement of his birth to the shepherds that it is of a saviour who is Christ the Lord. That is the same message that is proclaimed by the Church, later on—particularly by the apostle Peter in the book of Acts. And the response of people at that time is to receive the Holy Spirit, and to praise God. And that, of course, is what Mary does in her Magnificat. She praises God; she is given a new language which is really of praise to God. And we also hear, like the early Church, that there is a beginning bringing-together of these two women, because Mary goes into the hill-country to visit Elizabeth, and there, we are told, she remains for three months; and then she returned to her home.

So, in all of that, there seems to be very little cause for offence. What could people be offended about in all of that?

Well, in the Magnificat itself, we perhaps come closer to hearing something that might cause us to—shall we say—resist this good news of the gospel.

For example, in Mary's Magnificat, she says,

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

Well, sometimes we confuse our knowledge of God—what we think is our knowledge of God—with, in fact being known by God. The apostle Paul once made the comment in his letter

to the Corinthians that “knowledge puffs up; but love builds up; and, if anyone thinks he knows something, he does not yet know just as he should.” But the person “who loves God is known by God.”

Sometimes, we may think we know quite a lot about the Christian faith, we know lots about God’s plans for us. But this passage tells us that faith, receiving God’s plan for us which is something greater than we can comprehend, is what was Mary’s lot, and, in fact, is what is our own lot. We cannot comprehend all that God has in store for us. We receive his plan, his purpose, the way he accomplishes things, through faith, and not through mere comprehending, which implies a certain perspective of being superior to what God has done, which, of course, is not the case whatsoever.

Now, on the basis of this faith, and understanding that our knowledge is incomplete, we can perhaps be a little more sensitive to other people’s perspective, other people’s way of knowing, because they too can love God, and, therefore, be known by God, but yet have a different understanding of how God is active in their lives—just as the apostle Paul gave that sort of message to the Corinthians who very much emphasized knowledge and its place in the scheme of things.

So, we could be offended at this emphasis on faith, rather than knowledge. We may think our knowledge pretty superior, pretty wonderful. But this passage tells us that, in the person of Mary, here was a person without any special knowledge, any special wisdom; but she had the wisdom of faith, to receive what was spoken to her from God. And that is what we are called to have, as well—this wisdom of faith, receiving the wonder of what God does for us in Christ—God coming to us in him, and reconciling us to himself.

Now, another potential cause for offence is the subsequent verse in Mary’s praise of God. She says,

He has brought down the powerful from their thrones,  
and lifted up the lowly...

And, of course, she is just one of them. She is a lowly person. She has no credentials on the basis of which God might call her. She has been lifted up.

But, how about the powerful? We sometimes may feel that we are in control of our lives; we are masters of our own destiny, so to speak. In our current age, we see a great emphasis on the body beautiful. Now, of course, this is a characteristic which is not exclusively for our own time. But we see so many images of how the body ought to be—the stomach, the face, whatever aspects of the body. And there is a great deal of effort taken, on the part of some individuals, to create, for themselves, the perfect body. So they work out at gyms, they have plastic surgery, and the like. But perhaps that also veils something that is going on inside, in the person. They want to control their lives. They want to create the life—not that God has for them—but what they want. So they create—and perhaps we can include ourselves in that “they”—they endeavour to control their own life, create their own life, rather than receiving the life that they have from God—the self that God has given them.

And perhaps those very same people have difficulty in issues of control with respect to other people. They want to control the lives of others, as well.

But the example of Mary tells us that—well—we really do not have, ultimately, control of our lives, despite technology, despite all these things whereby we can alter aspects of our lives. Ultimately, we cannot change the life that God has given us, the gifts that God has given us, the circumstances, of ten, that come our way. We have very little control—to some degree—over many of these things, which are part of life.

And that lack of control is sometimes a very good thing, because, really, God has given us a life; and it is most natural simply to receive and live the life which God has given us, rather than trying, fancifully, to create our own life, which is doomed, really, to failure.

Another cause for offence might be also Mary's words in the Magnificat, where she says,  
He has filled the hungry with good things,  
and sent the rich away empty.

Of course, she had no great possessions to her name, just as she had no great wisdom, or power. And so, in a way, she stands for all of us, whose self is not determined by our possessions. Our possessions don't make us bigger people, or more valuable people, in the eyes of God. Our self is, really, independent of the things that we may possess.

Of course, this was seen in Jesus' encounter with the rich man, whom he challenged to give away everything he had, and to follow him. We need to recognize that our "self" is unrelated to the things that we possess.

Now, all of this is borne out, in a way, by Jesus' own approach to other people. So, for example, there are words of Jesus in the gospels, where Jesus praises God for "revealing these things to babes, rather than to the wise and powerful." Jesus also remarks, "Blessed are the meek; they shall inherit the earth." And, as I mentioned, he challenged that one rich young man concerning his own wealth.

So there is cause for offence. But the offence, of course, is the offence of God coming into human life, in the person of Jesus Christ, and calling us to live, not by knowledge or comprehension, not by power—the control of our own lives, or the lives of others—, not by wealth—but instead by faith, just as Mary did. And, from that faith, to be sensitive to other people in their understandings, who are yet beloved by God, to be compassionate to others, whom we wish to encourage in being their own persons, their own self; and to be generous, people who share what we have in the blessing of the poor, blessing of those whom we love and care for.

There is the offence of the gospel in this passage. But let's look beyond the offence to what it calls us to—namely, the wisdom, the power, and the blessing of faith.