

4th Sunday of Advent, Year C, 2022: Micah 5.2-5a, Psalm 80.1-8, Luke 1.39-55

‘My soul doth magnify the Lord! And my spirit hath rejoiced in God my Saviour!’ These are familiar words to many of us gathered here in church and online. In the Anglican Tradition we are familiar with these words through reciting or singing what is commonly called the Magnificat or the Song of Mary at Evening Prayer or Evensong. ‘My soul doth magnify the Lord! And my spirit hath rejoiced in God my Saviour!’ Others will be familiar with the words of the Magnificat through the singing of the hymn, ‘Tell out my soul the greatness of the Lord, unnumbered blessings give my spirit voice.’ And to mix it up a little, a German translation of the first line of the Magnificat would read if back-translated: ‘I will praise the Lord with thanksgiving and have delight in God, my Saviour.’

The phrase that struck me as I considered today’s gospel was simply, ‘My soul doth magnify the Lord!’ And especially the word magnify. In my hand I am holding a magnifying glass. The purpose of a magnifying glass is simple. Its purpose is to magnify an object, so that we can better read a passage or see and examine an object. My father was a stamp collector. He often got out a magnifying glass to look at a stamp and its markings more closely. My mother and father also collected a few coins. The other day I got out a magnifying glass to look at a coin that belonged to their small collection. Magnifying glasses now are used to scan the universe, or currently to decipher the properties of a virus. In both cases making visible what cannot be seen or perceived by the naked eye.

What was Galileo’s great achievement? Galileo’s great achievement was initially simply that of a craftsman putting technology to use in a new way. He assembled telescopes that were greater than any of the telescopes built up to his time. And in building these telescopes he identified new planets and moons. Think of it for a moment. He was the first person since the beginning of time to consciously see certain planets, moons and comets. The achievement to see bacteria and molecules through microscopes is just as amazing. These developments are simultaneous. Galileo’s dates are 1564-1642. The first microscope was assembled in 1590. And the first spectacles date to the 14th century. All these developments were made possible through human ingenuity by harnessing the properties of glass.

I suspect we can all see if we open ourselves a little that these developments enhancing our human ability to see beyond what can be seen by the naked eye change how we in turn come to see and understand the world in which we live, move and have our being. We don’t see the world as those who lived first in freedom and later in captivity in Egypt. We do not see the world as those who suffered the Babylonian

deportation. We do not see the world from the same perspective that Jesus the man saw it.

Often new ways of seeing are welcomed. Often they are derided, but what we can't do 'rockin in the free world' as Neil Young sang possibly tongue-in-cheek is pretend that the way we see the world and understand ourselves hasn't changed. The biblical witness is necessarily silent on these modern developments, although it uses a number of images from the world of agriculture or the blacksmith's workshop that point to earlier advances in how to cultivate grains or how materials can be manipulated by fire and water. It doesn't question the use of quarrying stones to build structures or to chop down trees to build habitations. And from time immemorial people have been studying the stars.

The North Americans amongst us will be familiar with the blacksmith's workshop in ways that Europeans to my mind are less familiar with today. Every heritage village used to have an active blacksmith's workshop for visitors to see how iron can be worked into horseshoes, pots, pans and kettles. Think of these words from the book of the Prophet Zechariah, "And I will put [the remnant] into the fire, and refine them as one refines silver, and test them as gold is tested. They will call upon my name, and I will answer them. I will say, 'They are my people'; and they will say, 'The Lord is my God.'" (Zechariah 13:9) Or recall John the Baptist's words of last Sunday, 'His winnowing-fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing-floor and to gather the wheat into his granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.' (Luke 3.17) Finally, there is the image of the potter forming a people out of clay. In the book of the Prophet Isaiah we read, 'Yet, O Lord, you are our Father; we are the clay, and you are our potter; we are all the work of your hand.' (Isaiah 68.4) A beautiful testimony to a living faith. What God desires for us is good and more than we can imagine for ourselves.

All the above is to say that advances in technology are part and parcel of the world we live in, and which in general we can affirm with qualifications. To be creative is surely one way in which we as Christians are being faithful to the commission of being made in the image of the Creator God whom we praise with soul and spirit. The above is to document that these advances will change the way we see the world and understand ourselves as human beings made in the image of God. It is a challenge. Some are left behind. Others are running ahead unanchored. The question that arises for us is, "Can we live with change well and adapt well while remaining faithful to God?" This is much tougher than we sometimes admit to ourselves. A further question arises about how we use our new-found insights and powers in the service of human life while remaining God-orientated in every fibre of our being. Questions arise about ethics, morality, justice and righteousness. The Christian must face up to these. The Church must face up to these. The Christian and the Church may need to

face the deep fear of being cancelled, of being found from a post modern perspective irrelevant. A sad experience for me in my work with the ecumenical council of churches over the past years is that in many questions we are facing we do not find an agreed common voice: on economics, on migration, on refugees, on assisted suicide to name a few accompanied often by virtuous sounding one-upmanship.. We may form and shape. We may also procrastinate, or seek the lowest possible common denominator. I may fear too much or too little, making going forward in the wilderness of our present difficulties cumbersome. But as Elizabeth reminds us, Nothing is impossible with God! It is true that things today often seem more difficult than they ought to be. Our personal challenge is to see where we are a hindrance and where we can be part of the answer.

We have traversed a long way given our starting point, which was if you remember a few words of Mary's from the Magnificat that take us back to Tyndale's New Testament translation of the Bible who wrote, "My soul doth magnify the Lord. And my spirit hath rejoiced in God my saviour!" These few lines from the whole corpus of the Bible can serve as the litmus test of our discipleship and as a Leitmotif. If we were called to be bishops each of us could take that as the motto under which we serve God in our day and age. We don't have to be bishops to make it our own today.

What I would like and pray for each of us is that we take home with us into our keeping of Christmas and as we embark on a New Year is simply this: Do my actions, Hand aufs Herz, magnify the Lord in a world where Christ is far away from public discourse or where Christ is hidden away in the phrase the Christian Judaic ethic. Do our lives in word, in speech, in action and in service magnify the Lord? Mary understood her life through which God was working as one through which the Lord God is to be magnified. To be evident. I would love for my life to be seen as one that magnifies the Lord, a life that points to God in which others can delight. I still have a long way to go and still much to learn how this might be possible.

When we look at each other, when we observe each other, when we live in community, is the Lord our God being magnified? Let us pray that this may be the case by enabling us to make a significant contribution to the whole. And where we are a stumbling block let us repent. New beginnings are possible at Christmas. New beginnings are possible today having learnt much from the journey so far. May each thought, word, gesture, action this Christmas be led and filled by the desire arising out of thanksgiving for what the Lord has done that we may magnify the Lord. This is a tall order. We are not alone. "For we do not have a high priest who is unable to empathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet he did not sin." Let us end by saying together our Magnificat, My soul doth magnify the Lord! And my spirit hath rejoiced in God my Saviour! **My**

**soul doth magnify the Lord! And my spirit hath rejoiced in God my Saviour! So be it!
Amen.**