

LUKE 1:46-57

When there's a flood or a natural disaster, usually a photojournalist will find somewhere in the rain soaked, filthy refugee camp, a young baby that has just been borne and looks out on the world with dreamy, wondering eyes, as we wonder what kind of world this child has been born into. In the Ethiopian famine, there was a story about two sisters, at the point of death, brought into the camp by their father and the nurse saying matter of factly, pointing to the younger of the two, "this one will die." The little girl had starved so long that her organs were shutting down and she was not expected to survive the night. There was no point in treating her. It was a waste of precious resources.

So we wonder about the baby, born in the refugee camp and the little girl. What became of them? I assumed the girl did die and was buried with so many others in a scrap of cloth somewhere in the dust.

Ten years later there was another programme and the same journalist, who had gone back to find out. The little girl did not die in the night. Somehow she hung on and hung on and they found enough peanut paste or vitamin porridge to feed her and she recovered. She, her sister and father had gone home. In the next famine, they starved again and were moved to another part of the country, where they were told things would be better. She was there, smiling, happy, full of life, brought back from the grave. But her sister was not. The one who was more likely to survive the starvation, her sister had died of fever in their new home. The government had moved them to a marsh, even though it was unhealthy and even though their life there was no less precarious than in the camp.

So we come to Mary and her song of joy as she finally tells someone how she is feeling about bringing her baby into the world. Perhaps she has had little chance before. Her parents, who had thought to give her in marriage to a sensible, reliable man, would have been appalled by her pregnancy. Joseph had only been persuaded not to divorce her quietly by a dream from God. She may have been lucky she was not stoned to death by her village. The news at the moment is full of accounts of women being killed by their communities for transgressing social norms and let's not kid ourselves that first century Palestine was very different, in a remote village in the north of a traditional country, where the religious authorities fully approved of stoning and widows starved and begged if there was no family to care for them. Perhaps Palestine, in its way, was not unlike Afghanistan, the heat, dust and little villages with their narrow mud-baked alleys, the proud and passionate people resenting invaders with different customs and different lives. The prophets in Palestine that rose and went about gathering disciples and preaching, promising the wrath of God and the repulsion of the Romans, had their day and were quickly rounded up and put to death. It was a violent time when famine was around the corner and a family might expect to lose some or all of their children in infancy.

Perhaps we might think of a Mary nearer our times, living in a two up two down house in Northfield Road with her parents and half a dozen brothers and sisters and the smog of the industrial revolution choking most of Birmingham when plenty of children ended up in St Peter's churchyard and dysentery, scarlet fever, measles and sometimes cholera were as common as industrial accidents. Or a 21st century Mary, fourteen years old, one protective hand to her expanding belly, bright eyed at the prospect of a baby of her own to love, looked upon by the weary eyes of adults thinking, "silly girl," when all she wants to say is how wonderful it is that this has happened to her and how she'll keep the baby and look after it. Mary's song of joy and acclamation is a reflection and an echo, like almost everything in the gospels, a mirror image of something that has happened already in the long history of

Israel. This time, it is Hannah, who, scorned by the priest Eli in her sorrow at being childless, when he thought she was drunk, has conceived and is bearing the child Samuel, who is to be given to God and be a prophet. Hannah, like Mary, will give her child up to the God that she worships and obeys, although Hannah did so when her son was two years old and thereafter the only contact that she had with him was to take him a new shirt every year when she visited the Temple, guessing how much he had grown and not knowing what his life was like. Mary had Jesus at home, probably until he was thirty, but he was never just hers to love, God was always calling him.

What has happened to Mary was not the ordinary pregnancy and birth of a baby into an uncertain world, but something that had never happened before and has never happened since, the birth of God incarnate, in human form. Mary's explosion of joy is about a secret that until now, she has not been able to share with anyone except God, that she is the god-bearer, something that Elizabeth recognises in her and helps her to share. Mary is looking outward, to the future that she cannot know and does so in faith and confidence that the Lord will provide for her and all will be well, whatever the circumstances.

This morning we remember in our prayers a young couple who were married here on Thursday. The marriage was brought forward because he is an army doctor and off to Afghanistan. This is the second marriage that I have conducted in such circumstances and much more than for other weddings, I cannot help but feel the back swell of history, that I am the latest in hundreds of years of Vicars who have stood in this church and prayed for couples about to be separated by a war. The uniforms were lovely and we had had a careful discussion about the swords, which have to be left in the porch if you are in the navy in case there's another mutiny, and we are talking, I assume, Spithead in 1797, but not if you are in the army, because the army has never mutinied and how doctor's swords would not be much use because they never bear arms and so their swords are cut off six inches below the hilt. When we pray this morning, think of Stacey- Jo and Simon, but also for all the others who came in their uniforms and formed the guard of honour and were in the congregation and who will be going as well.

We wait for the fulfilment of the hope and expectation that Mary in her song of praise to God began and which has continued in the two thousand years since, while we wait for the kingdom and the swords to be beaten into pruning hooks.

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