

Lord God, as we ponder your Holy Word, by the power of your Spirit, bring us back to Jesus and help us to hear him.

- What time is it today? And what song should the Church be singing?
- It was communion on Christmas Day about 10 years ago. I was sitting with my back to the rood screen, as we used to do in the dim, distant days of pews and stages, whilst others were distributing communion, those were the days when you could sip from the same chalice. There was a small choir of two, Helen and Antony, most of them having come the night before, and they had arranged to sing the carol 'See amid the winter's snow' as a duet. Unfortunately I didn't know this so when Paul started playing, and I realised no one else was joining in, I started singing lustily to support them, usually about 2 beats behind. Even more unfortunately, as I had my back to them and was slightly carried away with the power of my own voice, they had no way of telling me to shut up. Imagine the scene, two rather nicely tuned voices behind the screen, ... and one fog horn, out of tune and out of time in front. For six long verses, and six long choruses. I promise to be quiet in any song today!
- What time is it today? And what song should the Church be singing?
- We've got two readings which are offered for feasts of The Blessed Virgin Mary, our patron saint. One is extremely well known, the Magnificat, Mary's song, when she met her relation Elizabeth, the mother-to-be of John the Baptist. The other is less well known from the Book of Revelation, that vision of heaven and political commentary on the might of Rome,. Did you notice how it contains hints that it may be thinking of Mary, speaking, as it does, of a woman, clothed with the sun, giving birth to a boy. And it also contains another song, which we sometimes use at Evening Prayer.
- What word or emotion do you get from these readings when you hear them? Because I think that, although they quite clearly were songs of their day, their relevance is also quite clearly timeless and they give pointers about the sort of song we should be singing when the time is right.
- One emotion is, surely, joy. The first line of the song in Revelation, reads, "*Now have come the salvation and the power and the kingdom of our God*". There's a sense of relief, of fulfilment, of delighted exuberance in that.
- And in Luke, there is loads more joy. Hear the joy of the young girl who can't quite believe what has happened to her, God has chosen her, before the full import of the pregnancy and the weight of the baby hits her. '*My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour*'. '*Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed*.' '*the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name*'. and so on.
- So St Mary's is called also to sing a joyful song. A song that recognises that God has triumphed and that he has chosen us. Because the simple truth is that he has. And he has.
- But wait a minute I hear you feel. That doesn't sit very comfortably. For we are not in a very joyful time. The virus is not going away. People are too preoccupied to think about climate change so the use of single use plastics have gone through the roof. Extremism is on the increase. Tolerance is dropping and the problem of refugees and migrants is becoming more immediate and closer to home. Many people are worried about their jobs and we're about to enter a severe recession. I don't feel very joyful. More, anxious and worried. It actually seems rather a dangerous time. A time to be sombre rather than joyful.
- But that's like it was 2 000 years ago. Mary the teenage unmarried pregnant woman was in a very precarious position. And John the Divine, exiled because of his Faith, on the island of Patmos had the visions which makes up the Book of Revelation, would clearly have known what persecution felt like and where it often led in Roman times. And yet they were both clearly joyful. The lions in the arena or the sharp stones of the Jews held no power for them. How did they manage it?
- It seems that, however unlikely it must have felt, that they knew God was involved, in control, and nearby. He was not sitting idly by as the chaos of Roman occupation and Christian persecution reigned. He was doing something, doing it now, and doing it close by.

- Surely that's the message of Jesus and why Mary was pregnant. To up-end the established orders, to turn the world on its head and to save us from self-imposed disaster. Although he is not mentioned in Mary's song, he is the subject, the reason and the solution.
- How do we know *'His mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation'*? Because he has sent Jesus to save us. Because faithful Mary knew she was pregnant. And it wasn't Joseph or anyone else!
- How do we know *'He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly'*? Because he has sent Jesus to save us. Because powerless Mary knew she was pregnant. And it wasn't Joseph or anyone else!
- How can exiled St John write down the words of his vision, *'Now have come the salvation and the power and the kingdom of our God'*? Because of his faith in Christ and his understanding of where that would lead. To the salvation of the world in a real, physical, already present sense.
- Is not the situation of Mary and St John, each in their own way, just as dangerous and as threatening as our own? And yet their first and last response is joy. Because of their faith in Jesus. A corporate faith that has lasted 2 000 year and shows no sign of fading out.
- Christ has conquered sin and evil. Christ has conquered death and the hell of hopelessness. Christ is challenging us to live with values radically different from established worldly values. Christ is King of the wonderful creation God has given us to care for. Christ is reliable. Christ will not let us down!
- And St John clearly knew what forgiveness and new beginnings felt like, for he was a Christian and knew he had been redeemed and forgiven for his part in all the mess of human society and worldly values and that whenever he fell into sin and put himself first instead of God, forgiveness would still apply when he turned round and faced Jesus again. That is surely a reason to be joyful.
- And Mary, our patron saint despite knowing about fear and apprehension in her journey to Bethlehem, in her watching the chaotic ministry of Jesus, in her standing at the foot of the cross, clearly knew about joy at the resurrection as she realised that he had *'brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly'*. That is surely also a reason to be joyful.
- What time is it today? And what song should the Church be singing?
- I put it to you that we are in a more dangerous time than ever before. For crises threatening the world since the beginning of human existence have only threatened a small proportion of our population and have not really threatened the full extent of God's created earth very much at all. Plague, famine, warfare earthquake and flood tend only to affect a country or just possibly at most, a continent and rarely have a lasting effect on the delicate ecosystem that God has so skillfully created to keep life thriving.
- But today it is different.
- Because of our insistence on international travel we have allowed a plague to very quickly become a world problem. Because of our insistence to use technological advances for warfare as much as for peace, we have the power at the flick of a few switches to make the world uninhabitable. Because of our insistence on comfort, our fear of death, and our unfair levels of inequality where the rich are still getting richer and the poor are still getting less and less power and influence, the climate is warming to levels where we have no real idea of the effects of our actions but it could easily, very easily be disastrous for humans, animals, plants and all the created order.
- And even in the unlikely events of whole populations making radical changes to lifestyles, because of human sin and human conflicts of interests it is unlikely to make much difference. On the one hand we are being urged to 'eat out to help out'. On the other the Government is preoccupied with a huge increase in obesity and the resultant health problems this implies. You can't have it both ways. Most people are not attracted to eat out to enjoy a salad. We're not good at voluntarily changing our lifestyles!
- The time is now! The Church needs to sing. But what song should we be singing? What are the words?
- If these passages have any relevance at all today, and if we are people of faith in Christ then we surely have to accept that they have, then our song must surely be a joyful one that God has not forgotten us, that Christ has saved and will go on saving us, that God will act to save his creation from the sin which human beings are

inflicting and that we are ready to live in his Kingdom. A Kingdom where the proud have been scattered and the poor lifted up. A world where *'he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty'*.

- That's a great message if you happen to be a refugee queuing for soup, but not so good if you happen to be tucking into a steak for lunch. That's a great message if you happen to be scratching a living on the minimum wage but perhaps less secure if you are proud of the achievements of your life. So like John, like Mary, like the early Christians, don't expect to be popular. And don't expect God acting, to allow you to be able to continue to live the destructive and thoughtless ways in which ways in which all humanity, but especially the privileged part of the world in which are fortunate to live, have got used to over the last 100 years or so. Christ came to conquer sin, not to condone it.
- Instead let us be known as a secure rock emphasising Christian values in an age where everything else is being called into question. And that surely is a joyful song if not a comfortable one!
- Do you think that is the song St Mary's is singing? And to what extent does that reassure or disturb you?