

## Is Your God too Small?

'Your God is too small' is the provocative title of a little book written some years ago by J.B. Phillips. This intriguing title described those who have not found a God big enough for modern needs and issues. Phillips argued that if we have a Sunday School knowledge of God and no more, we won't as adults be able to grapple with the complex issues of modern life and how we are to live as Christians today. Our knowledge of the living God must be big enough to meet the experiences of life, otherwise for us too, our God is too small.

One person who faced this dilemma, the experiences of life and her knowledge of God, was Mary, whose song, the Magnificat, we read in our Gospel for today.

Let's remind ourselves of her situation as Luke spells it out earlier in Luke chapter 1. The angel visited Mary in Nazareth and announced that she had been chosen by God to be the mother of the Messiah, the Son of God. The Virgin, overwhelmed by this news, hurried south to the hill country of Judea, to share her wonderful secret with her relative Elizabeth. Elizabeth was despite her age, some five months pregnant with a son, John the Baptist. When these two remarkable women met, Elizabeth's unborn child leaped in her womb for joy, as if to salute the Christ, whose forerunner he was later to be. And Elizabeth, filled with the Holy Spirit, pronounced Mary blessed among women and called her 'the mother of my Lord'.

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It is hard to imagine the emotion which Mary must have felt on hearing these words. It was wonderful enough that the angel had visited her and told her that her child was to be called 'the Son of the Most High'. But now Elizabeth and her unborn child recognised and acknowledged her unique distinction. What was Mary to make of this? Was her God too small to make sense of these experiences? Mary had now been assured twice over about the child she had conceived. In response she broke into this hymn of adoring praise. 'My soul glorifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour, for he has been mindful of the humble state of his servant. From now on all generations will call me blessed, for the Mighty One has done great things for me – holy is his name' (vv 46-49).

So here we have the experience of Mary, indeed her unique experience. Visited by an angel, specially chosen by God, a miraculous conception, the promised son, named Jesus, who will be great and called 'the Son of the Most High', of the line of King David, and reigning over his people for ever in a never ending Kingdom. And all this achieved by God's Holy Spirit and God's almighty power. How does Mary process this? Is her knowledge of God big enough for these experiences?

And yet, if you take a small step back from these details, you have the typical experience of every Christian believer. God's amazing grace or mercy is granted to us all, as it was to Mary. But more generally, here is God at work in people's lives. He takes the initiative. He has regard to individuals and noticed them. He does great things for them by his mighty power. It is as if Mary said, 'Has God shown mercy to me today? That is because he is always merciful to those who fear him. Has he

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regarded my lowly position? It is because he always raises up the humble'.

So three aspects of Mary's understanding of God reveal just how 'big' her God is. Firstly God shows mercy to those who fear him. Secondly, God raises up the humble and third, God fills the hungry.

Firstly then God shows mercy to those who fear him.

'His mercy extends to those who fear him, from generation to generation. He has performed mighty deeds with his arm, he has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts' (vv50,51). So God's arm scatters the proud, and his mercy is over those who fear him. This does not mean those who are afraid of him. This is not condemning the timid, the fearful or the cowardly. It is rather a commendation of those who honour and have reverence for God, for those who stand in awe of his name and tremble at his word.

The Bible speaks about 'the fear for the Lord'. We know from the Psalms and Proverbs that 'the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom'. And by contrast, the wicked have 'no fear of God before their eyes' (Psalm 36:1, Rom 3:6). Jesus told us to 'fear him who can destroy both body and soul in hell', referring to his Father in heaven. The early disciples are described as 'living in the fear of the Lord' (Acts 9:31).

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It is easy today to lose sight of the unfathomable majesty of God and so tend to become over-familiar with him. Even in Christian circles casualness in conversation about the Lord God reveals a shallowness and small vision of who God is. Such people God 'scatters in the imagination of their hearts', as the older version puts it. His mercy is rather on those who fear him. Such was the Virgin Mary, a simple, devout, God-fearing young lady. Here is a 'big' God. One who shows mercy to those who fear him.

Secondly, God raises up the humble.

'He has brought down rulers from their thrones but has lifted up the humble' (v52). Mary not only feared God, she was also humble. In her song she describes her 'humble state' and is amazed that God 'has been mindful of her'. Maybe she did belong to a low social class, but more importantly she possessed a deep spiritual lowliness and meekness. Therefore God raised her up.

This is exactly what Jesus later said, 'For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted' (Luke 14:11). And he demonstrated this principle in humbling himself even to death on the cross, that God highly exalted him to his own right hand'(Phil 2:8,9). Christians are exhorted to 'humble yourselves under the mighty hand of God that he may exalt you in due time' (1 Peter 5:6).

Pride is the greatest hindrance to spiritual progress. Unless we humble ourselves like a little child, we shall never enter the kingdom of heaven. Mary knew this 'big' God has raised her up.

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Finally, God fills the hungry.

'He has filled the hungry with good things but has sent the rich away empty' (v 53). Mary was hungry. Like Zechariah, Elizabeth, Simeon and Anna in Luke's first two chapters, she was looking for the consolation of Israel and the redemption of Jerusalem. She was not satisfied with things as they were. She knew from the Old Testament prophets of God's promise to redeem his people and establish his kingdom. So she waited, eager, expectant, hungry. And in due time God satisfied that hunger, for the Christ was born.

Hunger is still an indispensable condition of spiritual blessing. Complacent self-satisfaction is still its greatest enemy. The rich, who are pleased with themselves as they are, have no consciousness of need. God sends them away empty.

Did not Jesus say: 'Blessed are they who hunger and thirst after righteousness for they shall be filled' (Matt 5:6). Not unless there is hunger in our hearts for God and for his holiness, is there hope for us today, for it is the hungry alone whom God promises to fill.

So here is Mary's God who is 'big' enough for her unique experience - he shows mercy to those who fear him, he raises up the humble and he fills the hungry. This God is 'big' enough for the experiences of life too for us this Christmas tide.