

Sunday 14 December 2025 – Magnificat! A Woman’s Song for a New Order – Felicity Cowling-Green

For this, the third Sunday in Advent, we are delighted to welcome The Revd Felicity Cowling-Green to the pulpit at St Mark’s. She is the part-time Chaplain at the Sheffield Children’s Hospital.

Reading:

Isaiah 35: 1-10. Luke 1: 46-55.

Sermon: Magnificat! A Woman’s Song for a New Order – Felicity Cowling-Green

A few years ago my husband Sam and I moved to the United States to spend a year in a community in Mobile, Alabama, in which adults with and without learning disabilities share life together. The core resident members - those with learning disabilities - are at the very heart of that community. One week after arriving, before we’d even worked out the morning routines, we were whisked off on a trip with the entire community to a gathering in Atlanta. Each new team member was paired with a core resident for the journey. And so, with a mixture of jetlag, caffeine, and rising panic, I boarded a bus to Atlanta to look for my partner, Annie P.

Annie P, as I soon realised, is the kind of person you hear before you see. Not only because she’s under five feet tall, but because she shouts a greeting to every single person who crosses her path. Ready or not, she runs across the room to take your hand and she beams at you. When I finally found her on the bus, she patted the seat next to her and said to me what she would go on to say often on that trip: “Jesus loves me.” And then, because Annie P is Annie P, she stood up and began leading the whole bus in a song I would later learn she would sing all the time, “This Little Light of Mine”

Somehow, her kind hospitality towards me, her absolute confidence in her own belovedness, and her insistence that she had within her a precious light to shine, eased the sense of anxiety I had felt about the trip.....As she spoke and sang those words, she reordered the atmosphere around her. She helped me, and everyone else near her, to remember that we too were beloved.

Annie P stands in a very long line of singing women. A few decades before her, Civil Rights leader Fannie Lou Hamer sang the same song: “This Little Light of Mine” in some of the most frightening places imaginable .. in jail cells, in the face of white supremacy and the Ku Klux Klan, in marches where she knew she might not return home alive. There is a lineage of women who sing because they refuse to let fear or empire or injustice have the final word.

We read in the Hebrew scripture how Miriam sings by the Red Sea as her people escape from slavery towards an unknown land (Exodus 15.21); how Deborah lifts her voice for villages left unsafe (Judges 5.7-8) how Hannah pours out her longing in the temple and then sings of a God who raises the poor from the dust (1 Sam 2.8). And then according to today’s Gospel.... in the Judean Hill Country... a young pregnant woman opens her mouth in the presence of her older pregnant cousin, and sings one of the most radical and subversive hymns ever to be sung. Mary’s Magnificat is the first Advent hymn, the first proclamation of the new order - the beginning of

God's reordering of the world by reordering the human heart. And it does not coexist easily with those in power.

During British rule in India, the Magnificat was at times prohibited from public worship because its language of reversal was judged too dangerous. In the 1980s, Guatemala's military government prohibited any public recitation of Mary's song, fearing its insistence on God's concern with the poor. In Argentina, the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo - whose children had disappeared during the Dirty War - placed the words of the Magnificat around Buenos Aires' central square, and the military junta outlawed its public display. Across history, oppressed communities have recognised themselves in Mary's words - and for that very reason, those words have been treated as a threat. The Magnificat has been held, and sung as defiance, because it names a God who refuses to leave the world as it is.

What's astonishing about the Magnificat is where it was sung from. Mary was young. Unmarried. Living under Roman occupation. Pregnant. She had every reason to remain silent...And yet, she sang. And it is an embodied song, rising from one who just a few verses earlier according to Luke, had said to the angel Gabriel, "Let it be done to me." Mary's words in Luke are far from the passive compliance she has often been painted with by authorities wishing to subjugate and domesticate women. Instead they are a wholehearted participation in God's new creation.

As Natalie Carnes observes in her book *Motherhood: A Confession*, Mary's words ("Let it be done to me") echo God's own words at the beginning of time: "Let there be light." She asks, "Can I imagine anything so transcendent? Humanity has been re-created, reborn by Mary's words." The Magnificat, then, is a song born from co-creation. It invites us to see God's work not as abstract, distant power, but as something alive in our bodies, our voices, and our relationships. A world reordered through faithful, embodied participation.

Mary does not sing of a God who lifts up the lowly, and of a world transformed, because she is naive. She knows, through her own experience, the weight of oppressive powers. She knows the danger, the scrutiny, that will fall on a young pregnant woman with no status. And yet she sings anyway. She sings because she sees through the powers that claim to run the world. "All generations shall call me blessed" says Mary. Her song is an act of holy defiance, of one who is participating in God's reordering of the world.

When I first heard about the far right Unite the Kingdom "carol service," yesterday my first instinct was honestly to despair. In a dangerously unmoored world, it's hard to know where to begin - how to act. And then I thought of Annie P. Living in the Deep South as an African American woman in her late seventies with a learning disability, our hypercognitive, over-productive and scapegoating culture has all too often silenced her voice, her rights and her gifts. But she knows her song - just as Mary knew hers.

Each day as Annie P remembers and names her belovedness, she re-tells the true story according to the light of God's truth - one that directly subverts the story of domination and oppression and the prevailing myths around her personhood. And as she sings she co-creates with God a vision of a reordered world and challenges those around her - you and me - to find our voices, our song. Annie-Pearl together with Mary and a whole lineage of prophets calls us outward - away from fear... to actively participate in God's reordering of the world.

Advent asks us to listen for that song, and to let our own lives echo it. To let Christ's light shine - the light the darkness cannot overcome. Amen