

The Magnificat; or, Song of the Blessed Virgin Mary

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The Magnificat is the first voice of joy before the sun-rise.

Sweet is the breath of Morn; her rising sweet,
With charm of earliest birds.

And as it is in Nature so it was with the breaking of the day of grace. It dawned on the world which was not awake to see it; yet were there songs and canticles, thanksgiving and the voice of melody. The Virgin Mother, Zacharias, Simeon and the choir of angels sang at the dawning of the day, and their utterances having been preserved for us by the reporter chosen of God, form a little psalter of the Holy Incarnation and Nativity.

In this collection the Song of the Blessed Virgin Mary stands first, so that she who brings the Lord into the world, also leads the praises of His Church, and gives the key-note to the universal choir.

The song, like many other words in Scripture, may either be read as the speaker's utterance of personal feeling, or recited as the Church's expression of permanent truth. Regarding them in the one way, we consider how the speaker meant them; but in the other, what the Spirit made them. We find in them, as used at the time, more lively emotion; as used afterwards, more ample meaning. For a due appreciation they must be considered from both points of view. On the present occasion we shall consider them in the first point of view.

1. "Mary arose in those days and went into the hill country with haste, into a city of Judah, and entered into the house of Zacharias and saluted Elizabeth." Who can tell the thought of that journey, or the relief of that meeting?

The expressions show the journey as taken soon; yet not instantly on the angel departing from her; else, why should the words "in these days" be interjected. Alford thinks that time enough had passed for Joseph to have learned that his betrothed was an expectant mother, to have received the Divine direction, and to have taken her to his home. But the reason given for this long delay—viz., that a betrothed maiden could not travel, seems insufficient in a case where so much more than social custom is to be taken into the account. Lange's supposition that she herself immediately made the communication to Joseph, and left Nazareth, while he was intending the divorce, is still less admissible. Bengel suggests that she went at once, in order that the announcement of the angel might take effect on the sacred soil of Judea, but the salutation of Elizabeth implies that she was then already in that first sense "the mother of the Lord."

However these things were, and however the journey was made, she was certainly urged to it by the great secret which could not be explained, and which, if explained, could not be believed, thus bringing on her soul an oppressive weight of glory and on her name an impending burden of reproach. What a load for a young mind to bear! Was there, in all the world, a person to whom this confidence could be made, and to whose sympathy it was

possible to appeal? Yes, there was one; “Behold thy cousin Elizabeth.” She, too, has a part in the history which is begun. She will understand. She will believe. Far off, in the hill country of Judea there is a house where relief may be found from the silence of secrecy and the solitude of the heart.

Therefore she “arose and went with haste;” setting out, we must suppose, as soon as some sort of escort could be found, and then pressing forward on her way. For about four days she would travel through the thickly-peopled land, passing through the great city to which her southward road would naturally lead, and from which again it would proceed towards the region which she sought. The secret in her heart would cast a strange light on all she saw; on the multitudes scattered abroad, and the stir and movement of the world; on the haughtiness of spurious religion and the eagerness of money-making business; on Pharisees at their ostentatious devotions, and publicans at the receipt of custom; on the stately Herodian buildings, and the cohorts marching by; on the signs of Israel’s vassalage, in the pomp and circumstance of Roman supremacy and Idumæan rule. She looked around in the consciousness, confined to her solitary breast, that the hour was about to strike which was (as she expected) to change it all. He that should come was at the door, and she was herself His Mother. She knew not, indeed, the real greatness of the mystery of which she was the instrument; she knew not the course which things would actually take, nor the vast depth and long range of the plan of God; but she knew that the promised hour was come, that “the holy” thing which should be borne of her should be called the Son of God, that the Lord God would reign over the house of Jacob for ever, and that of His kingdom there should be no end (v. 32, 33). The scene without, and the thoughts within, wrought together in her soul, possessing it with the ideas and feelings which the song reveals.

She has reached the priestly city; she has entered into the house of Zacharias and saluted Elizabeth. What an unexpected welcome! No need to think how she shall explain her coming, or how the almost incredible communication will be received. It has been anticipated by inspiration. She hears, “The mother of my Lord is come to me,” and is greeted with words which are the voice at once of womanly fellow-feeling and of high prophetic blessing. “She that believed” has found that her faith is shared and sealed afresh. Her joy has leave to speak, and exalted feeling vents itself, as it naturally would, in lyric tones and rhythmic cadence.

“And Mary said,” so St. Luke reports, with exquisite discrimination between the two speakers. The one “was filled with the Holy Ghost, and spake out with a loud voice,” as under the sudden illapse of a revealing inspiration. Of the other he only writes, “And Mary said,” as uttering thoughts which, however guided by the Spirit, had yet become her own. Indeed the song, if regarded, not from an English, but from a Jewish point of view, contains nothing which is not natural to the situation. The thoughts, the words, are those of a high-souled Hebrew maiden of devout and meditative habit, possessed with the ideas and familiar with the language of the Scriptures, in which she had been nurtured. We feel the breath of the Prophets; we catch the echoes of the Psalms; we recognise above all the vivid reminiscences of the song of Hannah, who, in her time, by special gift of God, had been made the mother of the Great Restorer of Israel. This is not a case of artificial imitation. Natural it was, most natural, that there should have been floating in Mary’s mind the words which belonged to the situation, and expressed the feelings most nearly approaching to her own, of all which were depicted in the beloved records of her faith.

It has been pointed out that the Canticum falls into four strophes; but its course of thought divides itself into two parts, the one personal and the other general.

Of herself the speaker says (46-50):—

My soul doth magnify the Lord,
And my spirit rejoiced in God my Saviour;
For He looked on the lowliness of His handmaiden.
For behold, from henceforth all generations shall call me blessed,
For the Mighty One did me great Things:
And holy is His Name,
And His mercy is to them that fear Him, unto generations of generations.

Where, in so few words, shall we find blended together such assured faith, exalted joy, reverential adoration, sweet humility, and modest reserve? These feelings, in minds of a more common cast, are not easily combined in their due proportions; but here they breathe together in entire unison, expressive of a mind attuned to the perfect harmony of truth. The faith, the joy, the triumph, are apparent, but chastened by humility, which dwells on “the low estate of the handmaiden,” and by the reverence which speaks in “God my Saviour,” “He that is mighty,” “Holy is His Name;” while a veil is cast over the great fact, which is left unspoken and only implied in such vague terms as “He looked upon me,” “He did to me great things,” “all generations shall count me blessed.” Swiftly, too, does the mind pass on from self to that great company among whom she takes her place—the fearers of God, who in all generations share in His mercy.

With these words all personal reflection ceases, and the strain becomes general, breaking out in high prophetic tones, as of one beholding the work of God in its actual fulfilment, and already such as it would some day prove to be:—

He wrought strength with His arm;
He scattered the proud in the imagination of their heart;
He pulled down the mighty from thrones,
And exalted the lowly;
Hungry men He filled with good things,
And rich men He sent empty away;
He took hold on Israel His servant,
To remember mercy, even as He spake to our fathers, to Abraham and to his seed for ever.

Thus does a high-toned mind rise above personal experience, however wonderful, to the great principles of the kingdom of God, those principles which the personal experience may illustrate, and the actual events exhibit. So it is here. Some may have felt (as the writer once did) that the turn of thought is scarcely what might have been expected from such a person in such circumstances. Was it quite natural for *her* thus to sing, not only of the lowly exalted and the hungry filled, but of the victory of the arm of God, the overthrow of things as they are, the reversal of the world’s judgement, and the confusion of its pride? Yes! Quite natural to a child of the Covenant, who beheld the domination of the heathen and the humiliation of her people Israel; quite natural to a child of the sunken and forgotten house of David, who had been passing by the palaces of Herod; quite natural to a child of God who saw in Israel itself the reigning power of worldliness, hypocrisy, and pride; and who also knew that on all this scene the kingdom of God was coming, with that utter reversal of its state, of which all the Prophets had spoken, and which was celebrated in the inspired song then, for other reasons, present to her mind.

But what these words imply, the following words express—namely, that all is seen in the light of prophecy and of the promise spoken to the fathers. The exact expressions are of great interest—“He helped Israel, His servant.” So St. Luke gives it, using the Septuagint words for Isaiah xvi.9—“Thou Israel are my *servant*....Thou whom I have *taken*,”—representing the Hebrew, which signifies the taking firm hold in order to strengthen or support). The concurrence of these two significant words directs us to that passage, and so to the promises into which it expands, promises entirely in harmony with the preceding thoughts in the Song (Is. xli. 8-14). But the title *παῖς αὐτοῦ* of itself recalls the whole range of prophecy in which it so frequently occurs, and intimates the view which it has taught the speaker to take of the true office of her people, as the servant of God appointed for the very purposes now at last to be fulfilled. The “mercy” to be shown is nothing new, but that which, though it might seem forgotten, is “remembered” in its due time. The “remembrance of mercy to Abraham and his seed for ever, as spoken to the fathers,” brings with it a cloud of references, such as to Ps. xcvi., where (as in the song) the Lord’s “holy arm has gotten Him the victory, and He hath remembered His mercy and truth towards the house of Israel;” or to the last words of Micah (vi. 20), “Thou wilt perform the mercy of Abraham, which Thou hast sworn to our fathers from the days of old.”

Finally, let it be observed that the closing words give a vast expansion to the whole meaning of the Song. If spoken within the circle of Jewish ideas, it yet looks far beyond their horizon, for the promise cited is, that “in thee and in thy seed shall *all families of the earth* be blessed;” and this too “*for ever*,” the mind of the speaker ranging away into the unmeasured future, as the words of the angel had taught her, “He shall reign over the house of Jacob for ever, and of His kingdom there shall be no end.”

The Virgin’s thoughts are thus uttered once for all, for they are never heard again. But we know the habit of her mind (Luke i. 29; ii. 19-51). This observant, apprehensive, reflecting spirit, enlightened at the first in the measure which this Song discovers, has henceforth to follow the unfolding of the great history of grace. She who retires from our sight receives, through the thirty unknown years, impressions which it is not permitted to divine, and afterwards watches, from without, the course of the manifestation to the world, till “the sword pierces through her own soul, in the sight of Israel rejecting and rejected, and of the cross of shame in place of the throne of David. Then all is interpreted by the Resurrection, the Ascension, and the coming of the Holy Ghost. “The darkness is past and the true light shines.” Nowhere could it shine more serenely than in the silent home where Mary shared with the beloved disciple, his clear apprehension of the manifestation of the Son of God, and his sublime intuition of the glory of the Incarnate Word: Who now liveth and reigneth with the Father and the Holy Ghost, ever one God, world without end.—Amen.

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