

The Blessed Virgin Mary: sermon by the Bishop of Bedford – 15.8.21

Luke1:52 He has brought down the powerful from their thrones and lifted up the lowly

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Part of Mary's great song of exaltation – her Magnificat - sung in the presence of Elizabeth that celebrates what God has done in her – lifting the lowly, being merciful to those who fear him, calling her to be a unique sign for Israel and the world.

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Did you ever have a Che Guevara poster on your wall? In particular that iconic red and black screen-print – with yellow star – produced by the artist Jim Fitzpatrick. I don't think I had one although I remember as a student desiring one - not least because everyone else seemed to have it. And not just the more radical friends of mine – even some of the most law abiding, establishment figures proudly displayed the poster apparently blind to the revolutionary, Marxist, guerrilla leader and his message that adorned their wall.

Now I am sure that few of us, whether or not we owned the poster, now have it centre place in our homes. A revolutionary icon is not where we are. Indeed, many of us, of whatever age, would probably now be uncomfortable with its associations. With apologies if you remain a true radical.

So why do we – the same sane, balanced, moderate people that we are – (well most of us!) on a regular basis proclaim a revolutionary tract that proclaims the total upheaval of society and the reversal of its values? Why, whilst we might run a mile from anything that threatened to disturb our settled existence do we sing a song that was banned in twentieth century Guatemala and Argentina for being revolutionary in intent?

Yet that is what we do – in our Cathedral each evening, in private devotions, every time we say or sing the Magnificat we express something of revolutionary intent. Except do we notice or is it just a backdrop – like those Che Guevara posters - familiar yet leaving us untouched by its implications?

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Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the German Lutheran theologian killed by the Nazis in 1945, wrote: *The Song of Mary is ... at once the most passionate, the wildest, one might even say the most revolutionary Advent hymn ever sung. This is not the gentle, tender,*

dreamy Mary whom we sometimes see in paintings; this is the passionate, surrendered, proud enthusiastic Mary who speaks out here ... it is a hard, strong, inexorable song about collapsing thrones and humbled lords of this world, about the power of God and the powerlessness of humankind.

It is the God of the prophets, of Hannah the mother of Samuel, of our Lord and the Kingdom where the first are last and the last first.

There is no way to avoid it – but Christianity is revolutionary at heart; not the revolution of guns and guerrilla tactics but the revolution of self-less love, cross-centred love, that cannot but seek a more just world than the one we have – where still too many people are in absolute poverty, where a few own the vast majority of the world's wealth, where vaccines are plenty for some and sparse for others, where climate change is caused by the rich but experienced by the poor..... And revolution needs revolutionaries; it needs you and me to revolt

For some of us that will mean taking to the streets – thank heavens for those who protest against nuclear weapons or homophobic abuse or for the future of the planet.

For some of us that will mean writing letters, signing petitions, fermenting campaigns – thank heavens for those who lobby for overseas aid, for better provision of the homeless, for the needs of the mentally ill.

For some of us that will mean living differently – thank heavens for those who live more simply, open their homes to the refugee, provide for neighbours in need.

For some of us that will mean the revolt that is prayer – thank heavens for those who pray that God's Kingdom will come, His will may be done.

For all us it is that radical discipleship echoing the early church – where lives and communities are transformed by the example of love.

You can hear the Magnificat and enjoy the music; you can sing the Magnificat and let the sound carry you to ethereal bliss; you can say the Magnificat and imagine Mary meek and mild – but isn't that like having Che Guevara on your wall as just a nice work of art.

What sort of revolutionary for Christ are you going to be? How will you sing – how will you live - the song of Mary.

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