

## Know Justice, Know Peace

I'm not a big believer in bumper stickers. My dad always warned me that they'd mess up the finish of the paint on a car, which made sense to me. Also, I generally don't like my most deeply held beliefs reduced to clever slogans and even if I run into a slogan that strikes me as appropriate, I always wonder how long I'm really going to feel that way. I have from time to time put decals in my windows that honored my alma mater, Rice University, and I have one right now from Star Fleet Academy. I never graduated from that institution and, indeed, I expect to be a space cadet for life. But generally speaking, I've eschewed bumper stickers.

There has been one notable exception. As I was preparing to depart from my job as Managing Director of Southern Indiana Theatres in order to accept your call to the pastorate, I received a number of small gifts from co-workers and students. One student, Beth Wicker, gave me a bumper sticker that struck a chord in me and so I broke with my usual habit and put it on the rear of my '97 Sebring where it is still affixed. I guess that means Colleen likes it, too. That sticker reads, "No Justice, No Peace; Know Justice, Know Peace."

It seemed to me when Beth gave me that bumper sticker and still today that those four words sum up a good deal of what God has to say to God's people in the Bible. As I explained to the children earlier, fairness is very important to God. Fairness (or to use the grown-up word, justice) is important to God not just because it is right but because without it we cannot know peace, the wholeness of shalom, the life which we were meant for and which God desires for us. As long as human beings fail to act justly toward one another, there will be resentments and grudges and righteous indignation that will prevent us from being at peace with one another. This was the message of many of the prophets, including the passage of Ezekiel 34 which we heard just two weeks ago. It was part of the message of Jesus, our Savior, and of his brother, James, who led the Church in Jerusalem after Pentecost. And it was the message of their mother, Mary, possibly the most uppity woman of all the uppity women of the Bible we've celebrated together.

Let's think about Mary for a few minutes. We sang a song this morning that shows our traditional view of Mary: "pure and lowly, maiden mother, wise and mild, joyful mother." It's wonderful to remember Mary's joy in the news that she is to bear the Son of God, the hope of all nations. These word images may conjure for us the traditional pictorial image of Mary – a modest young woman, eyes downcast in her humility, clothed in a blue robe that seems to exude peace and tranquility. But all of these sweet pictures only contain part of the truth. They all spring from the first half of Mary's song but perhaps we need to spend some time with the second half of the song as well as an alternate picture of Mary.

There is a complete tradition of pictorial representations of Mary that seems at odds with the meek young lady in blue that is perhaps most familiar. One of my personal favorite pictures of Mary is one I saw many years ago. I saw it only once but it has remained vivid for me ever since. It is a "Madonna and Child" by the Venetian painter Tiepolo and I saw it in the Museum of Fine Arts in Springfield, Massachusetts nearly 20 years ago. It is a work of the Italian Renaissance, so the characters, Mary and her baby, look like real people rather than like imagined archetypes. The toddler Jesus is a healthy looking little fellow with curly hair and a preternaturally wise and penetrating look in his eye. He is, however, clearly a little boy, not a grown-up rendered small. The mother is especially memorable. She sits erect, with a proud

## Know Justice, Know Peace

bearing and a fierce gleam to her eye. “Yes, my boy is special,” she seems to be saying, “and if you mess with him, you’ll be taking me on as well.” The prospect is daunting.

I wonder if Tiepolo, though an Italian, was influenced by Eastern Orthodox renditions of Mary. In the icons of that branch of Christianity, Mary is far more often pictured looking straight ahead at the viewer than down at her feet. Her gaze is direct and can be unsettling. Adding to the psychological evocation of strength and boldness, she is primarily dressed in red, rather than in the more pacific blue. According to the color symbology of icons, her red cloak over a blue under tunic is meant to convey how God has given her the mantle of her son’s divinity atop her humanity, so that she may be the *θηετοκος*, the “God-bearer,” in Orthodox thought. But I must confess that whenever I see an icon from Russia with Mary so dressed, I cannot help but associate the color with another meaning so intimately linked in my mind with that nation. Mary in red is also Mary the Red – in other words, Revolutionary Mary.

Mary, a revolutionary? It sounds absurd when we consider the quiet figure with folded hands and cast down eyes that we all know so well from both high art and the commercial kitsch of plastic nativity sets and “Mary in a Bathtub” grottoes. But let’s listen again to the words of the Magnificat, especially the second half: “God has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty. He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy, according to the promise he made to our ancestors, to Abraham and to his descendants forever.” Don’t be confused by what sounds like the past tense in English. In the Greek in which Luke recorded these words, the tense is what is known as the gnomic aorist and it denotes habitual action. In other words, God is going to keep on doing what God always does – rescue the downtrodden. Mary is rejoicing because she understands that God, through her, is about to keep the promise that the poor have longed to see come to fruition. Justice is coming, the corrupt regime will be brought down, the established order will be turned on its head. *Viva el revolucion!*

I am hardly the first to draw this conclusion about Mary. In his book, [The Real Mary: Why Evangelical Christians Can Embrace the Mother of Jesus](#), Scott McKnight writes, “There are two Marys. One wears a Carolina blue robe, exudes piety from a somber face, often holds her baby son in her arms, and barely makes eye contact with us. The real Mary,” McKnight writes, “was a subversive.” Or, as Jim Rice wrote after contemplating our scripture for this morning, “(Mary) sounds more like Mother Jones than Mother Teresa!”

McKnight goes on to detail just how revolutionary Red Mary was: “If you were a poor woman in the first century, if you were hungry, if you had experienced the injustices of Herod, and if you stood up in Jerusalem and announced that God would yank down the proud, the rulers, and the rich from their high places, you likely would be tried for subversion. If you were Herod or one of his ten wives or one of his many sons or daughters with (unexpressed, of course) hopes for the throne, you would conclude that Mary was a rebel, a revolutionary, a social protester.” In short, Mary could have been in serious trouble. Revolutionary Mary, however, was no stranger to trouble at this point. As an unmarried, pregnant woman, she was subject not merely to the gossiping tongues of her friends, not merely to ostracism from the good people of Nazareth, but to a death sentence. Had Joseph been a less compassionate man, Mary and her unborn baby

## Know Justice, Know Peace

could well have ended up at the bottom of a pile of stones in a ravine outside Nazareth. But this teenaged girl, who is, as we used to say, “in trouble,” this potential enemy of the state, this poverty-stricken unwed mother, lifts up her voice and sings!

This is part of the remarkable nature of Mary. She comes from the bottom of a harsh and feudal society, she has more troubles than many of us could bear and yet she thanks God for sending her those troubles and proclaims that she sees God’s future of Good News for the downtrodden dawning in her very experience. Mary’s joy in her unborn child and for God comes bursting through. “My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant. Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed; for the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name.” The audacity of Mary’s vision echoes down across the centuries. William Temple, Archbishop of Canterbury from 1942 to 1944 and sometimes called the most brilliant man to hold that post since St. Anselm in the 12th century, is said to have warned his missionaries to India never to read the Magnificat in public. Christians were already suspect in that country and they were cautioned against reading verses so inflammatory.

What we are called to remember on this Sunday of Peace is that we must continue to uphold the justice that leads to peace, to shalom. We must take up the revolutionary banner of Mary that promises the elevation of the lowly and the filling of the hungry while those who have profited from the misery of others receive a new perspective. Are we comfortable with Mary’s song? Not just the personal gratitude of the first half but the part that promises complete upheaval in what may be our very comfortable lives? Do we participate in the revolution? In the Magnificat of Mary in particular, as many commentators have pointed out, the Good News is “a word of hope to many and a word of challenge to some.” James F. Kay of Princeton Theological Seminary asks, “Can the God who is going to knock the powerful off their peacock thrones, their stock exchange seats, their professional chairs, and their benches of judgment really be our God? Can we really praise this God — Mary’s God?” Or will we turn away, seeking comfort where our culture tells us we will find it, in excessive consumption and self-seeking behavior? Will we, like Mary, rely on God to fill us with the truly good things? Or will we go on gorging ourselves on what we can make and get under our own human power, even though we are cheating others and killing ourselves and our planet in our mad hunger, trying desperately to fill the emptiness that only God can bless. What room do we make in our most inward parts for the indwelling of the Prince of Peace, Love Incarnate? Reflecting on such questions, Kathleen Norris has written, “As I pray the Magnificat, I am asked to consider how I have done in this regard. Have I been so rich, stuffed full of myself, my plans, and my possessions, that I have in effect denied Christ a rightful place on earth? Or am I poor and despairing, but in my failures, weakness, and emptiness more ready and willing to be filled with God’s purpose?”

Jesus said, “Blessed are you are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God.” When a rich man came to him asking what he must do to inherit eternal life, Jesus reminded him of the commandments of God. Assured by the man that he had kept the commandments since his youth, Jesus told him, “Sell what you own and give the money to the poor.” The gospels tell us that the man “was shocked and went away grieving, for he had many possessions.” And so Jesus said to his disciples, “It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God.” When we pair this saying with the Magnificat, it sounds as if

## Know Justice, Know Peace

Jesus learned his economics from his mother. Likewise, Mary's younger son, James, criticized members of the early Church for giving preferential treatment to those "with gold rings and in fine clothes." "Listen, my beloved brothers and sisters," he said. "Has not God chosen the poor in the world to be rich in faith and to be heirs of the kingdom that he has promised to those who love him? But you have dishonored the poor. Is it not the rich who oppress you? Is it not they who drag you into court? Is it not they who blaspheme the excellent name that was invoked over you?"

In Palestine in the time of Mary and her children, it was automatically assumed that if someone was rich, they had cheated others to gain wealth. If they were wealthy and righteous, they would surely be giving away most of what they had to support the poor who were their neighbors and cousins. Are things really any different today? When we look at the 1% that are now the target of criticism by the Occupy Movement, are we not also convinced that they are doing less than their fair share to help others? When there are people in the richest country in the world going to bed at night hungry, when those who are mentally ill are put out on the street to sleep in the cold, when children die of treatable diseases because they have no health insurance, then can we truly say that the resources of our country are being distributed equitably? And when the poorest of us, those gathered in this place as the followers of Christ, live in what most of the world would consider unattainable luxury, can we say that the world's economic system is performing fairly? Can we really be surprised that peace is lacking around the world when there is so little justice?

"My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior," sang Revolutionary Mary, as she gave voice to her joy over the prospect of her baby, the One born to be the Messiah of God. She named that baby Jesus and he grew into a man who brought the Good News of God's Kingdom to life in his words and in his deeds and, finally, in his body, which he gave to be broken for us and which was then raised in resurrection triumph. We have joined our voices to Mary's this morning. We have lit the candle of peace, remembering that Jesus is the bringer of true and everlasting peace and that he calls on us to wage peace by working for justice. Now the time has come for us to celebrate the meaning of the breaking of Jesus' body and the shedding of his blood, the ultimate gift of his love for us which embodied the love of God for us all. Let us come to the table of Jesus and then go forth with his message and his mother's to all people this Advent season, that God loves us and that in that love, God will use us to see to it that justice will ultimately prevail, so that the hearts of humans and the soul of our society might be truly touched by the Revolution of Hope and Peace and Joy and Love. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, Amen.