



GOD USES LITTLE PEOPLE

Text: Luke 1:46-56

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It seems very appropriate on this fourth Sunday in Advent that we have our 'God's Own' children telling the Christmas story. Because a case can be made for saying that Christmas, as one commentator put it, 'Is for children only'. At least I want to argue that the Bible shows that God brings in the kingdom by using little people. That's the big idea for this sermon. I'll illustrate the point by a parable I made up. Two men were given special honours by a great king. The first man was a confident well-to-do fellow. He was well aware of how clever he was and had done very well in life. He was well known in the community. When he heard that the king wanted to present him with the honour he boasted to his friends. 'It's about time. I'm glad he had the good sense to recognise me'. When the king presented the honour the man thanked the king. But inwardly he was praising himself. Afterwards he never said a good thing about the king. He was always busy boasting about himself. The second man was a quiet humble man. He did not regard himself as being in any way outstanding and was content to quietly remain in the background. He enjoyed a simple life and would never consider himself to be a well known figure in the community. When he heard the king wanted to present him with the honour he was amazed. He could not think of any reason why the king would want to do that. But he was grateful for the king's generosity. He said 'I would be glad to receive such from you, your majesty. Truly you are a gracious man. I will always be grateful.' From then on the second man always spoke highly of the king.

Which of the two men brought most praise to the king? Obviously the humble man. Hopefully this little parable explains why God uses the 'little people' to bring about his hope for the world. As Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 1:26-29 *"Not many of you were wise by human standards, not many were influential, not many were of noble birth. But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise. God chose the weak things of*

the world to shame the strong. He chose the lowly things of the world and the despised things...so that no one might boast before him....As it is written 'Let him who boasts, boast in the Lord'".

No where do we see this point better than in the birth of God's own Son. The creator of the universe was about to become a human being and dwell with the people. If we were planning his birth, using the world's standards, then we would argue he should be born of royalty, amongst the noble, the wise, the strong. A person of such importance, the God-man, should dwell in a palace. But God chose to use the, so called, 'weak and foolish' in the world to bring about his salvation. His son was born not in a palace but a cow shed. Why? Because those involved stand back and say 'Don't look at us. Praise God! This is his work'.

That comes out so strongly in Mary's song. Its central theme is how God turns the standards of this world on their head. Listen to the song: "*God has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts...rulers are brought down and the humble are lifted up. The...hungry are filled and the rich are sent away empty.*" In this song it is not the achievement of influential people that is emphasised . It is the power, the holiness and the mercy of God that stand out. When Mary had gone to visit Elisabeth, her relative declared "*Blessed are you among women...*" and called Mary the "*...Mother of my Lord*". What a welcome! And Mary's first response had been "*My soul praises the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my saviour.*" Mary was well aware of her privileged position. She was to give birth to the Messiah. That was the dream of every Israelite woman. So she sings "*From now on all generations will call me blessed*". But she does not pat herself on the back for that. She gives all praise to God. "*For the Mighty One has done great things for me...for he was mindful of the humble state of his servant.*"

Mary sees herself as a very ordinary young woman. She was a teenager about 15 years old. She was engaged to Joseph, a young carpenter. Not the well paid trade it is today. And they came from the small town of Nazareth in the backwaters of Galilee. They didn't even live in a religiously significant place like Jerusalem. The only thing of significance was that they were long distant relatives of King David. But even that didn't mean much. After a thousand years there were thousands of descents of David. To this very alive, normal teenager God came with the greatest privilege ever granted to a

woman, to bear the son of God himself. What an honour for Mary. As we listen to Mary's song we hear a very humble and grateful person.

When you look carefully at her song you notice her gratitude is not just due to the fact she gets to bear the Christ child. What is even more significant for Mary is that she realises that through the birth of this child she, herself, will have forgiveness. Mary sings "*My spirit rejoices in God my saviour*". Mary recognised through her son's saving work she too would be saved. Sometimes we can forget that. Too often we can picture Mary as perfect. Like the Roman Catholic idea of her 'immaculate conception'. They argue that as 'the Mother of God' Mary was born perfect and sinless. But she was just like us. A common, sinful person. Joseph makes that very clear. When he discovered his fiancé was pregnant, well you know what he presumed. So even more reason for Mary to be in praise of God. God had allowed her, a sinner, to bear the sinless one, the 'Son of the Most High'.

There is grace written all over this story. I wonder if you realise that the theme of Mary's song is not very original. We find the theme constantly in the Old Testament. In fact her song is very similar to Hannah's song after she bore Samuel. That is, it is God who does great works. He is the one who initiates the way of hope and life. God is the one who is faithful to his covenant promises. As Mary sang "*He has helped his servant Israel, remembering to be merciful to Abraham and his descendents forever, even as he said to our fathers.*" Think of Abraham and Sarah. They had Isaac when they were so old, they were nearly good as dead. Think of Israel. Time and again Israel was saved by the mighty acts of God when it seemed they would be overpowered. Even Zechariah and Elisabeth now finally were going to have a child when it no longer seemed possible. And Mary, as a virgin, mind you, was to have a child by the power of the Spirit. There can be no getting away from it. There is no place for human pride here. It is all God's doing. Mary's song makes it clear. To participate in the forgiveness and greatness brought about by Christ's coming we must come in humility.

Now, we have been saying that this period of Advent is a time not only to look back at Jesus who came. We also look forward to Jesus coming again. We said last Sunday that we, the church, are to be the dawn of the new day. We are to be awake anticipating Christ's triumphal arrival. We are to give a foretaste of life when Jesus returns. We, as the church, are God's fellow workers. We are to bring this world to its hope when there

will be true peace and justice. And yet, I guess, we will have our doubts. Are we really up to doing that? We are ordinary, sinful people, who can't always get our own act together. Are we being called to bring a taste of the kingdom? Are we to be those who bring hope to the world? This is where the lessons of Christ's first coming are so important for us as we anticipate his second coming. Think about what we just learned about how God operated the first time. For the advancement of his kingdom, God is looking for humble people. He uses the little people. God doesn't look at your well written CV or the degrees you have earned. He is not impressed by your advanced skills or who you know or your influence. God can, indeed, make use of all those things. But what he is primarily interested in are those willing to serve him. He is looking for those who will be his disciples and follow his ways at school or work. He is on the lookout for the person who will humbly witness for Jesus by the way they conduct themselves as they are going out for the evening or playing sport. He is after those who are willing to answer his call and do whatever God asks. He wants those who are obedient to him and will grow as disciples and make disciples. Whether we are rich or poor, wise or simple, God will use anyone who is willing to step back and give God the glory.

Let me put it to you as a word play. If you want to be used by God as his instrument, as one of his 'tools', you need to be aware that he prefers to use 'fools'. A Baptist minister started off a sermon saying 'I have entitled this study 'God's Tools' because it deals with those whom God uses to change the world. But I could have entitled it 'God's Fools' because the startling truth is that God prefers fools to use as tools when he wants to do a really great work in the world.' Dr Martin Lloyd-Jones, the famous London preacher, once said: 'We Christians often quote 'not by might nor by power, but by my spirit says the Lord'. And yet in practice we seem to rely on the mighty dollar and the power of the press and advertising. We seem to think that our influence will depend on our technique and the program we can put forward. And that it would be the numbers, the largeness, the bigness that would prove effective. We seem to have forgotten that God has done most of his deeds in the church throughout its history through remnants. We seem to have forgotten the great story of Gideon, for instance and how God insisted on reducing the 32,000 men down to 300 before he could make use of them. We have been fascinated by the idea of bigness. And we are quite convinced that if we can only stage, yes, that's the word, stage something really big before the world, we will shake it and produce a mighty religious awakening. That seems to be the modern concept of authority.'

And yet throughout the scriptures we see time and again that when God does mighty things he uses those who seem to have so little to offer. We have already mentioned Abraham and Sarah who were so old. Moses, was eighty years old and had a bad stutter. David was just a teenage shepherd boy, the runt of the family. So often God uses the little people, the remnant, the leftovers. So let us not as a church get this idea that we are not in a position to be the dawn of the new day. Let's not choke in the effort to be growing as disciples and making disciples. God is not in need of our heroics. He needs humble people who love him and are obedient in their everyday lives. Those who are willing to be used in a multitude of small ways to bring the gospel, that God can turn into awesome acts of grace. Listen again to Mary's song:

Tell out my soul, the greatness of his name!
Make known his might, the deeds his arm has done,
his mercy sure, from age to age the same,
His holy name, the Lord, the mighty one.

Tell out my soul, the greatness of his might!
Powers and dominion lay their glory by.
Proud hearts and stubborn wills are put to flight,
the hungry fed and the humble lifted high.

If God is on a mission to turn upside down the arrogance of human pride, to bring peace and justice, then he can only use those who work with an upside down system. If we are to bring glory to God we can only do it from a position of humility. Anything else will get in the way. On one occasion an orchestra presented Handel's 'Messiah' so beautifully that the applause was thunderous and everyone turned to the composer. Handel stood up and with his finger pointing upward, silently indicated that the glory should be given to God rather than himself. Are you willing to do that, to be that sort of servant for God? Jesus is coming again when he will literally turn everything on its head as he renews the universe. In the Sermon on the Mount, in Matthew 5, Jesus picked up on the theme of his mother Mary: "*Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of Heaven. Blessed are those who mourn for they will be comforted. Blessed are the meek for they will inherit the earth. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness for they will be filled. Blessed are the pure in heart for they will*

see God. " Will you be there when Jesus comes again? Will you be used mightily by God to bring it about? Let's sing Mary's song, not just with music and words but with our lives.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

These questions can be followed up personally, with a Christian friend, in your small groups, or in discussion after the service. Reflection is important because too often we hear a good sermon and soon forget it without actually growing spiritually or changing in attitude or what we do. The reflection questions are meant to be challenging, because our spiritual growth and the salvation of others is so important.

- Why does God chose the 'little people' to do his greatest work?
- What does your character and lifestyle reveal about God? Are we seeing ourselves as the dawn of the new day?
- How willing are you to do whatever God asks of you as his humble servant?