Third Sunday of Advent: Peace and Prayer

Scripture – Luke 1:26-56 and Luke 2:19

Introduction

* We have seen in events over the past years, from terrorist attacks to political conflicts to environmental catastrophes, the prominent use of the hashtag ‘#prayfor’ and then the name of the specific circumstance. Even #PrayForBoris was trending on Twitter in 2020 when the Prime Minister at the time was hospitalised with Covid-19.
* There’s something about moments of distress and uncertainty that makes people think about or seek out a ‘higher power’ that can hopefully bring about a sense of peace, calm and healing.
* However, prayer is often forgotten when there is a sense of joy and celebration. We see in the life of Mary how communication with God was central in her young life at different times.

Context

* In the Gospel of Luke we see Jesus’ birth through the eyes of Mary. Despite initially troubled by the angel’s news that she will give birth to the Son of God (Luke 1:35), her response of obedience is ‘I am the Lord’s servant … May your word to me be fulfilled’ (v38).
* Upon hearing this news Mary visits her cousin Elizabeth. These two women, one older whose longing for a child spanned the decades, and one younger whose pregnancy is sudden and unexpected, both share a sense of privilege and favour in being used by God in different ways.
* From these initial verses we can highlight two intimate moments of connection between Mary and God.
* The first is an external song of praise expressed in her ‘Magnificat’ (Luke 1:46-55). Mary understands the honour to have God actively involved in her life. This sense of humble privilege gives way to passionate gratitude that merges with praise and prayer.
* Commentators Leslie J Francis and Peter Atkins in *Exploring Luke’s Gospel* highlight how Mary’s song opens her heart to the signs of God’s activity in her own life (v47), but also to the world around her, past and present. It’s a song of justice, a song of concern for establishing truth and for seeing that right prevails (vv48-51); it’s a song of compassion, of concern for the poor and oppressed (vv52-53); it’s a song of continuity with the past, rooted in the promises God made to Abraham and his descendants (vv54-55).
* Major Nick Coke writes: ‘Mary's song is sung every day in churches around the world as a daily declaration of how God is putting the world to rights. Its implications to the way of the world are so powerful that it has been banned in different countries for being too subversive! Every time we pray we undertake a subversive act, for we are declaring God’s coming peace over our world.’
* The second moment is processed internally. After the shepherds visited Jesus, we read that ‘…Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart’ (Luke 2:19). Perhaps now seeing Jesus before her very eyes, her mind was cast to those early days of pregnancy in which her world was turned upside down. Her initial fear, then her sense of wonder and praise and finally her humble obedience to God’s purposes for her life and the whole world, now culminate in the birth of this tiny boy. She couldn’t have imagined what was to come.
* Quote:

*‘Without the sacred practice of treasuring and pondering, we can lose God’s words. If we do not remember what he has done, if we forget what he has promised, those promises may perish or be lost from our own heart and mind.’* (Mindy Kiker, co-founder of Flourish Gathering)

* Mary’s ‘pondering and treasuring’ can teach us about the importance of prayer and wisdom, about keeping God’s word and promises safe in our hearts, even when we can’t see how things are going to pan out. There’s no sense of fear or anxiety, but a deep inward peace as she sees God’s promises fulfilled.
* When writing to the Philippians, the apostle Paul penned this crossover between the peace that comes when we give our praises, petitions and ponderings to God in prayer: ‘Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus’ (Philippians 4:6-7).

Reflection

* Mary’s life was a reflection of deep trust and faith in God. We live in an age where we expect so much and at times feel that much is owed to us. However, staying close to Jesus’ heart and living in tune with what he is saying to us and requires of us is pivotal not only to our own journey of discipleship, but also to the peace and prosperity of the world around us (Jeremiah 29:7).
* Whether in times of heartache, reflection or celebration, a steadfast lifestyle of prayer can strengthen us, despite whatever is going on, as our intimate connection with God himself. An attitude of thanksgiving contributes to this inward peace.

Prayer

Father, lavish your peace on me just now through your Holy Spirit. Lord, give me the strength to create and develop a new approach to prayer, a lifestyle of prayer. I want to bring everything, good and bad, to you. I want you to be the most important part of my life – you are all I need. Amen.