

The Festival of the Blessed Virgin Mary

16th August 2020

Isaiah 61: 10 - end; Luke 1: 46 – 55

“Not a lot of people know that!” is the catch phrase associated with – who? I say “associated with” deliberately because Michael Cain actually denies coining the phrase. He says it’s all a rumour started by Peter Sellers, and he wouldn’t mind something clever being attributed to him but he does mind something stupid that he didn’t say!

But what a lot of people don’t know is that this church is dedicated to Saint Mary. So right now we’re on St.Mary’s Bridlington. We just refer to it as the Priory or Bridlington Priory, so when every now and then I get some post addressed to me at St.Mary’s Bridlington I do a bit of a double take and wonder what’s going on. But we are St.Mary’s Bridlington and today – or yesterday to be precise – is our patronal festival. We don’t make much of it. And I suspect that might be because Mary for middle of the road

Anglicans, which I guess is how most of us would describe ourselves, is a tricky topic. Our shared worship isn’t peppered with the Hail Mary and petitions to our Lady, and I doubt whether our personal devotions are either; and if we’re honest we find some of the more fanciful bits of Mariology, which the Roman Catholic Church has frankly confected over the centuries, all a bit difficult to take.

The problem with Mary is that, as she’s been elevated onto a pedestal, she’s been degraded into an insipid, two dimensional cardboard cut-out of the ideal woman – or to be more precise, a man’s ideal of an ideal woman: beautiful and submissive. And yet, in the words attributed to Mary when her cousin Elizabeth affirms the fulfilment of God’s purposes in her pregnancy; the words we’ve just heard proclaimed as our Gospel reading today; the words that are part of Evensong and known as the Magnificat; these are feisty and subversive words. Little wonder that the East India Company – apologies to people who’ve

heard me tell this anecdote from the pulpit again and again, but it's too good not to repeat – little wonder that the east India Company, that had effectively the franchise to run the British Empire in India, banned the Magnificat from being sung at Evensong. They didn't want people singing about the powerful being brought down from their thrones and the lowly being lifted up. They didn't want the people they were oppressing and exploiting latching onto the promises of Mary's song. Because the promises of Mary's song are subversive: Mary's song promises that the world will be turned upside down.

The problem is that attempts to be subversive, to turn the world upside down have been, probably without exception, unsuccessful; and from the English Civil War in the C17th to the Bolshevik Revolution of the C20th have led to tyrannies that were just as bad as the regimes they replaced. A fortnight ago I spoke of the difference between optimism and hope. And it's what is relevant here as well. The problem with

historical attempts to turn the world upside down is that they've been based on optimism. There are two types of optimism. There's the romantic optimism of Ruskin and Morris and even Keir Hardy, who believed that if we do away with the nasty competitiveness of capitalism, we will revert to living in a golden age of rural idyll where everybody is kind and content and nobody has any reason to commit a crime. And then there's modernist optimism the soviet system which embraces industry and technology and thinks, if we harness them, it is inevitable that we'll end up living in perfect soviet communities.

The problem with optimism, of either, kind, is that it fails to take into account that, even when you've "thrown down the powerful from their thrones and lifted up the lowly", people will still always be self-centred and selfishly acquisitive. To use religious jargon, what optimism fails to take into account, is sin.

Hope is what is celebrated round this table. Hope acknowledges sin. Hope takes sin seriously. Hope requires that sin be repented of. We don't gather around this table until we have confessed our sins. And that doesn't just mean our own peccadillos, our lascivious thoughts and bad temperedness, however shameful they may be. We confess the systemic sin of the world we live in, ordered as it is; so hard-wired into things simply being the way they are, that when an algorithm is used to allocate A-level grades to students – just an algorithm, something without any moral personality, or agenda or ideology, just a computer crunching numbers – it comes up with a formula that disproportionately favours students who are already privileged anyway. That's what we confess; that we live in a world where everything automatically works to keep the powerful on their thrones and the lowly trampled underfoot.

When we get real about that; when we ask for God's mercy to deal with that; it is then we can gather round

this table and celebrate hope. The perfect society is what is inaugurated around this table, where God's grace is freely available to all. It is here that bread and wine is transformed to have a significance that transcends, that defies its physical properties. And it is here that all who gather are transformed to receive a new dignity that transcends, that defies our material circumstances. It is here that heaven intersects with earth. It is here that we participate in the heavenly banquet. We glimpse heaven. Our religious imaginations are fired. And we are propelled out of church to live differently and to make a difference.

This does not mean that it's all religious symbolism and we are given an opiate to help us put up with the injustices we see around us. We are changed. We live differently. We live with religious imagination and act upon the impulses of that imagination to change the world. It is impossible to think that the world would have been changed by C19th social reformers without them including people fired with religious

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imagination. It is impossible to think that the world would have been changed by the 20th American civil rights movement if it hadn't included people fired with religious imagination. They didn't make the world perfect. Only optimists would have ever thought they could. But they gave the world hope. And it is to that hope that we are dedicated, the hope of the song of Saint Mary, at St. Mary's Bridlington.

Amen.