Magnificat

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Advent 4 B – Luke 1 26ff

Lots of us here are of an age to remember the protest singers of the ‘60s and ‘70s –Eric Bogle, Joan Baez, Bob Dylan, Aretha Franklin – they protested against the Vietnam war, against materialism, racism, sexism and slavery. Theirs were songs of a new generation crying out against the wrongs of their societies. But wars haven’t stopped, and materialism, racism, sexism, slavery and injustice are still mainstream. Thankfully, new songs keep being written, calling out the injustices and naming them clearly for what they are. In this land, I think of Yothu Yindi, Helen Reddy, Uncle Archie and many others. Missy Higgins is one of our current champions on the climate crisis. She says, ‘*At the moment I’m really into political music because I think that is the bravest thing of all … today. People are less inclined to speak out for fear of being cut down on social media … [we need] music that isn’t afraid to be torn down, isn’t afraid to be judged, declares what it’s there for.’*

https://www.abc.net.au/news/2017-10-18/missy-higgins-apocalpyse-and-climate-change-inspire-new-music/9059168

When something really outrageous is happening – something completely unjust and apparently unstoppable – if someone sings a protest song, naming the wrong that’s being done to the many by a powerful few, suddenly, hurt and oppressed people out there hear that they’re not alone. And these songs terrify their oppressors. Authorities ban them if they can – they try to shut down the social media platforms and the broadcasters that play them. But the songs won’t be silenced.

This is not a new phenomenon. This morning, we shared a very old protest song; Mary’s song – *The Magnificat*. The heart of Mary’s song is protest, and it has terrified powerful elites

ever since. *The Lord has shown strength with his arm and scattered the proud in their conceit, casting down the mighty from their thrones and lifting up the lowly. God has filled the hungry with good things and sent the rich away empty.* Meek little Mary? Gentle, sweet, compliant teenage Mary? Yeah, right. Mary fills the shoes of the great women protest singers of her tradition – Miriam (Ex 15:20-21) Deborah (Judg 5:1-31) Judith (Jdt 16:1-17) and Hannah (1 Sam 2:1-10).

The Magnificat is such a powerful protest song that several illegitimate regimes have banned its public use; and not always in places you'd normally expect. When the famous missionary priest and linguist, Henry Martyn, arrived in India in April 1806 he found that it was forbidden to recite the Magnificat at Evensong in case the idea of 'putting down the mighty from their seats' was taken too literally. https://sayitstraight.co.uk/local-history/biographies/henry-martyn-1781-1812/

That might sound absurd, but it's true. And the Magnificat has been banned in more recent times too. In Argentina after the 'dirty war' of the '70s, it was banned when the mothers of the disappeared used it to call for non-violent resistance to the government. And in the '80s the government of Guatemala is also reported to have banned its public recitation.

So what's this all got to do with Advent? Advent is the time when we remember that we're waiting for someone to come; someone we expect to set wrong things to right. And we who wait now – like Mary, like John the Baptist, like the prophets who awaited Jesus' first coming – we who wait for his coming again – we are meant to be vocal; mindful that the one we're waiting for expects us to be public poets; singing living hymns of justice – just like our Mary and others have done.

Mary reminds us today to sing very feisty protest songs;

- songs to name greed, injustice, oppression and prejudice;

- songs to assure perpetrators and their victims alike that justice *will* come;
- songs to name what is good and right – to make sure it stays clearly in view;
- songs to tell colonised peoples, refugees, women and children that their cries for safety, dignity, respect, restitution, treaty, justice, truth-telling and freedom are just and sacred, and what they ask for will be given them no matter how confident their abusers may feel now;
- songs to expose and challenge the war we're waging on Earth, our common home
- songs to summon us to humility, to repentance, to renounce our greed and our delusional religion of consumptive economic growth

We got an anonymous letter under the door saying people of the Church shouldn't concern ourselves with these things; that this was the realm of politics. Let's hear Mary again. *The Lord has … scattered the proud in their conceit, casting down the mighty from their thrones and lifting up the lowly. God has filled the hungry with good things and sent the rich away empty.* Mary knew politics *is* God's business, and the child she carried knew that as well. Last week, we heard a passage from Isaiah 61 that Jesus chose to read out to his home synagogue. They threw him out for it. *Lk 4.18 The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free,* *19 to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour.* With a mother like his, how could he be otherwise? Amen.