

Homily at the Jubilee Mass for the Sisters of Mercy

Ballarat, October 26th 2019.

On Saturday mornings during AFL season, I enjoy listening to the Coodabeen Champions on ABC radio. Towards the end of their program they review what they've learnt throughout the program and ask for instance, 'Billy Baxter – what have you learnt this week?' As I was preparing for today by exploring further the Cantic of Mary, I did what most of us do these days when we want to know something – we go to google!

I was surprised at what the search revealed and what I learnt about this Cantic

- It's the longest set of words spoken by a woman in the New Testament.
- It's also the first Christmas carol ever composed.
- In the past century, there were at least three separate instances of governments banning the public recitation of the *Magnificat*. These governments considered the song's message to be dangerously subversive.

Frequently throughout history, people on the margins have identified with this powerful song and been inspired to believe that God can bring liberation to their plight.

These are powerful words that we proclaim each evening in our Evening Prayer.

During the British rule of India, the *Magnificat* was prohibited from being sung in church. In the 1980s, Guatemala's government discovered Mary's words about God's preferential love for the poor to be too dangerous and revolutionary. The song had been creating quite the stirring amongst Guatemala's impoverished masses. Mary's words were inspiring the Guatemalan poor to believe that change was indeed possible. Thus their government banned any public recitation of Mary's words. Similarly, after the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo—whose children all disappeared during the Dirty War—placed the *Magnificat's* words on posters throughout the capital plaza, the military junta of Argentina outlawed any public display of Mary's song.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer recognized the revolutionary nature of Mary's song. In a sermon during Advent 1933 he said that "*The song of Mary is the oldest Advent hymn. It is at once the most passionate, the wildest, one might even say the most revolutionary Advent hymn ever sung. This is not the gentle, tender, dreamy Mary whom we sometimes see in paintings.... This song has none of the sweet, nostalgic, or even playful tones of some of our Christmas carols. It is instead a hard, strong, inexorable song about the power of God and the powerlessness of humankind.*"

Similarly, Carolyn Sharp says "*don't envision Mary as the radiant woman peacefully composing the Magnificat. Instead see her as a girl who sings defiantly to her God through her tears, fists clenched against an unknown future.*" She goes on to say that "*when we do this, Mary's courageous song of praise [becomes] a radical resource for those seeking to honour the holy amid the*

suffering and conflicts of real life.” This is such a prophetic, passionate and powerful image of Mary, through her tears, fists clenched against an unknown future and it confirms what Pope Francis said about Consecrated Life when he spoke earlier this year on the Feast of the Presentation, for the World Day of Consecrated Life *“that consecrated life is praise which gives joy to God’s people, prophetic vision that reveals what counts... It is not about survival, but new life.”* For all who are celebrating Jubilees here today we celebrate their prophetic vision and witness of life and say thanks be to God!

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