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<sup>46</sup> And Mary said, ‘My soul magnifies the Lord,

<sup>47</sup> and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour.

Luke 1:46-47 (NRSV)

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“Thankyou.” We use this word in many different contexts. Sometimes when we are shopping and struggling getting through the store, someone may help. And we say “Thankyou.” Children and family goes about daily tasks, and we say “Thankyou.”

Most of us were taught that saying “thank you” is simply the polite thing to do. But recent research in social psychology suggests that saying “thank you” goes beyond good manners – it also serves to build and maintain social relationships. We know what this means: in our homes and families, where there is genuine care and gratefulness beyond self, people will grow together and feel bonded to one another. (How have you felt like this? In what way are you truly thankful to those around you?)

But we live in a critical society. Reality TV, advertising and gossip magazines are aspects of the ‘popular culture’ which can easily contribute to people’s need to put people down rather than appreciate them. So there are, perhaps, less thankyou’s said today than decades ago. We have a culture of ‘bad news sells’. There’s very little celebration in the headlines these days. (Are there ways this ‘world’ gets you ‘down’?)

One of the main reasons that people have mental health problems is the culture we live in. We’re constantly being told we need to be thinner, have more friends or earn more money, so it’s no wonder we end up feeling disappointed. We’re taught to compare ourselves to others and we often put others down to make ourselves feel better. This, in fact, doesn’t make us feel better at all; actually, doing something kind generally makes us feel better, as does appreciating where we are instead of constantly attempting to change it. The more compassion we express, the better it is for mental health.

According to positive psychologists, the words ‘thank you’ are no longer just good manners, they are also beneficial to the self. To take the best known examples, studies have suggested that being grateful can improve well-being, physical health, can strengthen social relationships, produce positive emotional states and help us cope with stressful times in our lives. But we also say thank you because we want the other person to know we value what they’ve done for us and, maybe, encourage them to help us again in the future.

Many Businesses have also taken notice of the effect of saying “Thankyou.” Psychologists and researchers have long been fascinated by the effects of praise on workplace performance and behaviour. In 2004 the Gallup Organisation conducted a worldwide research project, surveying more than four million employees about the importance of praise and recognition. Gallup concluded that employees who receive regular praise are more productive, engaged and more likely to stay with their organisation, than those who do not. The survey results also indicated that

employees who are praised receive higher loyalty and satisfaction scores from customers, and even enjoy better health than employees who are not.

But there are those who think that saying thank you at work is superfluous. One employee, who worked at an event-planning agency once said. "It always seems ill-timed or inappropriate. I'm just doing my job. No one needs to thank me for that. It feels like someone is making fun of me. I don't have a choice as to whether I want to do what is asked of me or not! I want more than just 'thanks' to feel appreciated."

Authentic recognition comes with no strings attached. Calculated attempts to overpraise a coworker will only produce a toxic environment, as another employee in the study said. "You can't pretend to create togetherness. Even if I like to feel valued, I can sense when I'm being duped!" True gratitude requires spontaneity without calculation, strategy or manipulation. (Have you ever felt someone's "Thankyou" wasn't genuine? What do you think makes for genuine "Thanks"?)

As we come to the Holy Gospel this day, including Mary's Song (Luke 1:46b-55) we can clearly see that Mary's heart is overflowing with joy and gratitude. Here all is joy and gladness. Her soul is opened wide as she praises God continually, 'my whole being magnifies the Lord'.

Mary's song is known as the Magnificat. It is modelled on Hannah's song (1 Samuel 2:1-10), which followed the birth of her son, Samuel. The parallels are quite strong. Hannah's song begins, "My heart exults in the Lord; my strength is exalted in my God." Hannah speaks of reversals: "The bows of the mighty are broken, but the feeble gird on strength" and "He raises up the poor from the dust; he lifts the needy from the ash heap, to make them sit with princes and inherit a seat of honour." In the ending verses, Hannah celebrates the fact that the Lord "will guard the feet of his faithful ones...and exalt the power of his anointed." Mary's song follows much the same outline.

Meanwhile her spirit is seen as having rejoiced once for all in God Who is her Saviour, and Who through her is fulfilling His saving actions. Like all women Mary was a sinner and needed a Saviour, and she rejoiced because she could look back to when she had responded to Him and recognised in Him her own Saviour. She knew that God was her Saviour. It was something that she would never forget.

Did you know that such songs praising the Saviour's birth were always part of this celebration? Such songs actually began to be sung before the Saviour was even born. One of the songs is sung by Mary, and the other is composed by Zachariah. There are actually five songs in these first two chapters of Luke. Two by women, two by men, and one by the heavenly angels. One Christian writer, writing at the end of the 19th century, likens these two chapters to the entryway of the grand cathedral of the Gospel. Imagine, as you enter the doors to this cathedral, the first thing you encounter is glorious music. On the one side are Zachariah and Simeon, the one chanting his Benedictus, and the other his Nunc Dimittis. Facing them, as if in antiphony, are Elizabeth and Mary, the one singing her Beatitude, and other her Magnificat; while overhead, in the frescoed and star lighted sky, are vast multitudes of the heavenly host, enriching the Advent music with their Glorias. What an incredible image this is!

It would be an interesting exercise, if it were possible, if we were able to bring Elizabeth and Mary forward from their time into ours. What would this 'visitation' be like – a young teenage girl who is pregnant before marriage getting together with a much older lady who had waited many, many years before falling pregnant? In many ways we would probably say that this is not an unusual meeting. Most people in our society today know of someone who has fallen pregnant much earlier than planned, or know of someone who has battled apparent infertility for many years.

But the meeting of Mary and Elizabeth occurred at a different time in a different world. For Mary, a young teenage girl, to be pregnant out of wedlock was a public scandal. And for Elizabeth, to be barren for many years raised the question of whether she too had missed out on 'blessing' from God because she did not deserve something from God. It is little wonder that these two ladies met. Not only were they relatives, but in the eyes of many they would have been perceived as social outcasts.

It would be normal for an unwed mother, and a long-time barren lady, to wonder how God's blessing was working in their lives. Yet, due to the angelic messages, they indeed knew far beyond all those around them the reality of God's true blessing at work in the world. And this worked true thanks and praise in their hearts...

Mary's gratitude is because God has looked on her in her lowliness and relative poverty (Mary was so poor. She could offer only 2 doves for her postnatal purification rite after the birth of Jesus – that was the minimum offering that the poor gave). And yet God had raised her to a position where future generations will declare how blessed she has been, as they see that the promises made to her were indeed fulfilled. They will see her as blessed because of 'the great things' that God has done in and through her in the birth of the Messiah, in the same way as that same mercy is applied to all who fear Him of all generations in the way now about to be described, and especially so through this One Who will be born from her. Mary's blessedness will thus be shared by all.

Martin Luther once said in a Christmas sermon, three miracles occurred at Christ's nativity: (1) God became human; (2) a virgin conceived; (3) Mary believed. For Luther, the greatest miracle that first Christmas was the last of these. Mary believed and she sang.

There are a lot of people who think they have not worshipped God unless they get goosebumps and chills, or break out in tears, or end up shouting with excitement. That is soulish worship, but not spiritual worship. Mary reveals that true worship of God begins with one's spirit (our 'inner being'). It begins with an understanding who God is, and what He has done, and all that He has given to us. If you do not understand the truths of Scripture, you cannot truly worship God in your spirit. This is why Jesus says in John 4 that true worshippers worship God in spirit and in truth. True worship of God flows through the one's based upon the foundation of the Word of God. This is what happens to Mary here. She says that her soul magnifies, and praises and delights in the Lord. In other words, she is very emotional, and excited about God. But this only happened because her spirit wilfully understood and rejoiced in God's word (Luke 1:38: Then Mary said, 'Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.').

Where are blessings for us at this time of year? Sometimes I wonder if we so often fail to appreciate the blessings in our lives because we are looking in the wrong places, or looking with wrong attitudes. The materialism of Christmas, and our own preparations, often distract us. And sometimes the words and deeds of others (family, friends, and congregation members) sometimes cause wounds that also may distract us.

Elizabeth praises Mary because "She is the mother of the Lord." Elizabeth praises Mary because "She has come to Elizabeth" – and therefore she knew she was in the presence of the Lord. And, Elizabeth praises Mary because "she believed".

Ultimately, both Elizabeth and Mary knew themselves to be sinners who needed a Saviour. It was this that gave them true reason for praise, and in which they saw their 'blessing' and 'praise') lie... Those who see their need of Christ, and are desirous of righteousness and life in him, are the ones to whom true blessing comes.

Mary and Elizabeth were full of praise – but their praise was not in themselves or one another. Mary and Elizabeth sing because they have been given a new life to share. Each sings because that which nature and the world have named as barren is suddenly filled with life – and life that will, in its own time, shake the foundations of a world that has absolutely no idea what is going on. These two women rejoice, and we are called to rejoice with them. Their joy is ours. Their song is ours. We too are blessed because God loves us to come into our most barren world and our broken lives in Jesus.

The key question is not what we are getting at Christmas, or what we are doing at Christmas, or where we are going at Christmas – but whether we are humbled before God and believe in Jesus Christ as our Saviour. This will help always recognise where true blessing lies in life, and what is truly worthy of honour and praise. It is this that gives us truly thankful and praise-filled hearts.

Mary's song, also known as the Magnificat, is an inspiring piece of Scripture. Her words are profound in the face of what she was about to do. We don't know what she was thinking regarding the pregnancy. We don't have a written word that describes her fear of what others will think or how they will treat her. All we have are these magnificent words that reveal her praises to God. The message for us is that we are to trust in our God. No matter the situation or circumstance, God has it all in His hands.

Maybe this year hasn't gone how you planned. Maybe you expected your life to be much different than it is. Perhaps you're even mad at God and blame Him for your circumstances. If so, it's okay to be troubled, but I invite you to do as Mary did, and rejoice in the midst of your pain. Lay it all at the feet of the One who came to save you, whose birth we celebrate. Despite the struggles, Mary considered herself blessed because of what God did for her, and you can too as you ponder how He has blessed you. Amen.

*LORD God, loving Father: thank You for the gift of Your Son, Jesus, and for the hope that He gives us. Even when our lives take difficult or unexpected turns, we can still find our joy and peace in You. Thank You, in Jesus' Name. Amen.*