

Back in 1989 I left the Parish of Mountmellick in Co Laois to be Rector of Ahoghill & Portglenone, just outside Ballymena. I followed a Rector who had cherished the old Book of Common Prayer, affectionally referred to as the ‘Black Book’. He had resisted all efforts by the wider Church to introduce any of the modern language service books.

I quickly realised that any changes would have to be made gently and with sensitivity. We began by introducing on a monthly basis a more informal order of evening service without the traditional canticles.

On one of these evenings, a couple turned up who would usually come to our morning service. Chatting after the service, Bernie said to me that he had enjoyed the service but ‘I missed the Magnificat’. (This Canticle is based on the Gospel passage that we read this morning.) The Magnificat, he went on, reminded him of his childhood, attending Evening Prayer in his home Parish of Ballycastle.

Then as we continued to talk, Bernie remarked, ‘When you think about it, the Magnificat may be traditional – but when you read it, it is in fact very radical.’ It reminded me that there are passages in the Bible that we know so well that we can stop listening to them. For those of us brought up in the tradition of the Church of Ireland this passage, as it did Bernie, reminds us of Evening Prayer, a quieter, more peaceful service, with not so many attending.

But when you do take the trouble to take a closer look at it, the Magnificat, the Gospel passage we read this morning, is about a God who turns things upside down, who challenges all efforts to assert our position, our status.

I ask you to leave that thought in your mind and come with me in your imagination to the home of Hyacinth Bucket (Bookay) from the old television series ‘Keeping up Appearances’. An invitation has arrived in the morning post to attend a meal in the Town Hall. Poor long-suffering Richard is simply rather pleased that it has come. Such simple pleasures are not enough for Hyacinth – she wants to know what this invitation represents in her long struggle for acceptance in higher society. ‘Who else will be there?’ – perhaps just as important is the question ‘Who won’t be there?’ After all, if all the neighbours were invited, there won’t be much prestige in going. Then there is the question of what she will wear in order to match the social status to which she aspires. Of course, always lurking in the background are her sisters and that dreadful brother-in-law, Onslow, constant reminders of her origins. Of course, her social climbing never quite comes off – she is always left on the edge.

We laugh at her foolishness but realise that she is a parody of many attitudes that lie just below the surface in ourselves – a striving for acceptance, a striving for prestige, for status.

Of course, this is not a modern phenomenon we see plenty of examples of it in the Gospels. Jesus tells the story of the guest invited to dinner who on arrival assumes one of the better seats, only to be told he needs to make way for

someone more important and Jesus’ advice ‘Whoever humbles themselves will be exalted and whoever exalts himself will be humbled.’ The disciples themselves were not immune to this. On occasions we hear of them arguing among themselves as to who will be greatest in the Kingdom of Heaven. On such occasions, Jesus gives them a model of humility – he washes their feet, the task of the lowest household servant; he sets a little child in their midst, saying except you become as a little child, you will not enter the Kingdom of heaven. The model of the servant, of the child, of taking the lowest place at the feast.

What he is talking about here is the importance of becoming little before God. The child, the servant, the little ones accept the lowest place, accept direction. To be little before God is to accept that we have no claim on God’s love, on God’s grace. To be little before God is to acknowledge the reality of grace – that whatever we have, whatever we are, is ultimately a gift.

This fundamental shift in attitude before God must then go on to be reflected in our attitudes towards others. It is only as we become little before God, that we become sensitive to others who are little – little not by choice but by the harsh realities of life – the poor, the marginalised, the oppressed. In his day, Jesus highlighted those who were little in the society of his day, the poor, the crippled, the blind, the leper, those who were excluded from polite society. A mark of Jesus’ ministry was a care and a concern for the very ones society despised. Not a dismissive or condescending care that tossed a few crumbs or spare change their way. But a care that embraced the leper, that reached out to

the sinner, that raised the lame to their feet. This is the Jesus of the Magnificat, who lifts up the humble and poor, who sends the rich empty handed away.

At the heart of Jesus’ ministry lies the cross – his ultimate care for humanity, a care that reaches down and raises us up with hands that have born the mark of the nails. As the old hymn reminds us, ‘Nothing in my hand I bring, simply to thy cross I cling.’

Passages like the Magnificat, like Jesus washing feet, putting a little child in the midst of the disciples have the effect of leaving me just a little uncomfortable. Like poor Cynthia we can get so caught up in ‘Keeping Up Appearances’, that we lose sight of the fact that we stand before God simply and solely on the basis of grace. We need, as I say, to become little before God so that we may, in his name and in his power, be enabled to reach out and draw into the Kingdom those who have nothing or, perhaps more important, those who are thought to be nothing in the eyes of the world.