

# Mary's Song - Christmas Number One

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[ 0 : 00 ] Good morning, St. Silas. Good morning, Rob. We're a little bit warmer today than last week, those of you here last week. Thanks to Ruth Davidson, our administrator, who has sorted out our heating amongst everything else she's been doing this week.

It would be a great help to me if you could keep your Bibles open at Luke chapter 1. If they fall and close, that's page 1026 as we look at that together. And as always, if you'd find it helpful, there's an outline inside the notice sheet just to see where we're going as we look at that together.

More important than that is that we have God's help as we hear from him in his word. So let's pray. Let's ask for God's help. Know that the Lord is God.

It is he who made us. O God, our Father, Creator and Redeemer, help us to meet you in your word, to see you in the Lord Jesus and to respond to you in the power of your spirit in our lives for your glory.

Amen. We'll just start with a video clip. We'll just start with a video clip.

[ 1 : 39 ] We'll just start with a video clip.

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If you were growing up in the 90s, like me, you'll remember the Spice Girls kind of dominated Christmas number one for a while. If you look back a bit further, Cliff Richard had his mistletoe and wine and Saviour's Day.

And this year it could be a choir again after that very special touching song last year from the Lewisham NHS Trust. It could be Cruz Beckham. We don't know who it will be. But this morning we're going to go back to the first ever Christmas number one.

You might say Mary was the first ever Christian in a sense. And this is her song to celebrate that first Christmas. Now we started looking at Mary last week and we saw what happened to her.

[ 3 : 17 ] She's a humble girl from an insignificant town. And she's given this news from an angel that God has chosen her to carry and deliver his great Saviour King into the world.

It's extraordinary, isn't it? A short time later she writes and sings this incredible song. Why? Well, why do we sing? One of the reasons that singing is such a great gift from God to us is that singing allows us to express passion within us.

And in fact, as we sing, it often generates and warms that passion within us. So Mary sings here because God has put a well of joy in her heart so deep that it's just flowing out of her.

In other words, she's happy about Christmas. So I don't know how you're hoping to make your Christmas a happy one, but I'd love us to be feeling as joyful as Mary was in writing this song.

So let's do things Mary's way. From her song we get three things. Why she rejoices at Christmas. What God is up to at Christmas. And thirdly, how she finds fulfillment at Christmas.

[ 4 : 29 ] So first of all, why she rejoices at Christmas. We left her last week with an amazing example of trust in God's promises, but nothing more.

She knows that having this baby will be very costly for her as a virgin girl in that culture. But she says in verse 38, I am the Lord's servant.

May your word to me be fulfilled. But by verse 46, the expression is quite different, isn't it? My soul glorifies the Lord.

My spirit rejoices in God my Savior. In other words, right from her inner being, she's overflowing with deep happiness towards God.

Why? Well, she's rejoicing in a mindful God. I don't know whether you noticed that. The next verse, verse 48, starts with a four, doesn't it? She rejoices, For he, God, has been mindful of the humble state of his servant.

[ 5 : 32 ] From now on, all generations will call me blessed. For the mighty one has done great things for me. Holy is his name. We hear a lot today about mindfulness, don't we?

Maybe mindfulness is the next big thing. But what really matters to Mary isn't whether she's mindful. It's that God has been mindful of her.

Literally, that he's looked upon her. It's a Bible word, that looked upon word, for God choosing to have compassion on his people. Now for Mary, that loving care from God was unique, wasn't it? But this is key to the life story of every Christian, all the time. So that we could think, You know what, my life is going really well at the moment.

The job, the family, the home, it's all coming together. But even if all of that was taken away in one shot, I would be okay. Because what really matters, deep in my heart, is that in the gospel, God has shown that he is mindful of me.

[ 6 : 37 ] Or we could think, if we have to, I'm sick and I can't control it. But I know from the gospel that the God who made me has been mindful of me.

He has looked on me and given me grace and he is watching me intently to act for my good. She rejoices in a mindful God. But something else has changed since Gabriel visited Mary.

She also rejoices in confirming testimony. You see, Gabriel came to see her. Faith, but no joy. We saw that last week. Faith, no joy.

Sometimes that is the best we can manage. It might be how you're feeling this morning. But because of Mary's faith, she moves quickly. She heads south to the hill country of Judea.

It's probably about four days' journey from where Mary was. She seeks out Elizabeth. We're not told why. I wonder if it might be because Elizabeth is from the religious side of the family. Her husband is this senior priest.

[ 7 : 42 ] She goes for help, perhaps, for some advice. If you're Mary on that journey, several days, I wonder the kind of emotion she must have been feeling as she headed to the home of her relative.

Perhaps she was feeling turmoil, fear, doubt. Am I right about this? But in verse 40, look at what's changed. She entered Zechariah's home and greeted Elizabeth.

Elizabeth is pregnant with John the Baptist. And this is more than just feeling the baby kick, isn't it? Verse 41. When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the baby leapt in her womb.

And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. In a loud voice, she exclaimed, It's extraordinary, isn't it?

Because God is very kind, he is giving Mary another testimony of the truth of what's going on, of what she believes. Here is John the Baptist, the prophet God has sent to point people to Jesus, already being a prophet, doing cartwheels in the womb to signal to his mum, his poor mum, Elizabeth, that now is the moment for her to be a prophetess, to speak out.

[ 9 : 03 ] And so that in her and in him inside, there are two more witnesses confirming to Mary that what she believes is true. Now you might be here this morning and in a similar position.

You might be thinking, I love the idea that the God who made me would be mindful of me, but I'm struggling to believe it. How can I believe this?

And wonderfully, turning to Jesus is not a blind leap of faith. At Christmas, we connect with a God who is giving us testimony about himself so that we can trust him.

I remember bringing a friend once to an event called Grilla Christian where we had a panel of Christians and you could ask them questions about why they were Christians, what Christians believe.

And I brought a friend along, Chris, who was a lawyer with me, and he said to me afterwards, I really liked what the speakers said. I really need to think more about it.

[ 10 : 03 ] But also, I need to investigate the other world religions as well first before I work out what's going on. And you can kind of understand that, although I did think that's going to take you a long time.

But also, there's another fundamental difference between looking at Jesus and looking at the other major world religions of the world. And it's about verifiability. We'll look at this again a bit tonight in our Big Questions series.

When you look at major world religions, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, they make truth claims about ultimate reality, whether there's a God, what that God might be like.

But those claims are not historically verifiable. The Quran, the Islamic faith, claims Muhammad is given words from the prophet, words from an angel to dictate down, to write down, to make the

Quran as God's word, the word from Allah.

But there's no way of verifying whether or not that really happened historically. Now, the Christian faith and the Jewish faith are very different to that because they are rooted in a belief that the God who made us has acted in history so that we can know what he is like.

[11:27] And so, as you read Luke's Gospel, you're not being asked to trust something that you could never investigate. Luke roots what he's saying about the person of Jesus Christ in its historical context so that he explains the times and who was ruling and what was going on.

We read in the beginning of Luke's Gospel, chapter 1, that he wrote his book as an orderly account so that, verse 4, you may know the certainty of the things you've been taught.

So if you're not sure what to believe about ultimate reality, you're not sure who Jesus really is, Luke's Gospel is written for you. It's not just one man's view of Jesus. We can trust the historical evidence because he tells us the testimony of Mary, of Elizabeth, of John the Baptist, of Zechariah, of Anna, of Simeon, of the disciples who journey with Jesus, of Zacchaeus, and so on, as you read it.

And the more you discover that the Christian faith is built on credible historical testimony, it gives you joy. It's such a relief to Mary.

I wonder if sometimes Christians get trapped into spending too long worrying about whether or not it's true. Stop worrying about whether it's true because it is true.

[12:45] So just get on with enjoying the promises of God and living for him. There's another thing about Mary's visit to Elizabeth. At its most basic, this is one God follower going to see another God follower and being really encouraged.

And that can be true of us whenever we meet with other Christians, when we come to church, to roots, to growth group. Sometimes it's a battle to go, isn't it? I sometimes think, you know, if I didn't host this growth group, I probably wouldn't turn up tonight.

Sometimes it's a battle. It's easier not to go. But as you spend time with other Christians, their testimony of their faith and their trust in God walking with him through their lives, there's great encouragement in that.

So make the most of our coffee time after the morning services and try and get God on the agenda in conversations with other Christians. Speak of your walk with him to encourage other people. get other people to speak about their faith to encourage you. Who could you encourage with gospel truth this morning? She's rejoicing in confirming testimony.

[14:03] So as we move into her song, we come to our second question to answer this morning. What is God up to at Christmas? We know we're not the people we ought to be.

And in verse 50, there's this offer of great mercy to anyone. You see that, verse 50? His mercy extends to those who fear him from generation to generation. Then in the next verses, Mary sings as though she's singing about the past.

But really, she's singing about the future. She's looking ahead, but it's so certain what God's going to do now that Jesus is coming that she sings as though it's already happened. And what is God up to in Jesus' coming?

He is gathering and scattering. Verse 51, He has performed mighty deeds with His arm. He has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts. He has brought down rulers from their thrones, but has lifted up the humble.

In other words, for anyone who is willing to fear God and trust Him and knows that they need Him, Jesus comes to lift you up and bring you joy. But if you are proud and self-sufficient, He comes to tear you down.

[15:16] Very clear, isn't it? He comes to gather the scattered and scatter the gathered. If you're someone who feels a bit scattered, who knows that you need help, Jesus comes to gather you.

If you're somebody who thinks, really, you're all together, who feels that you have it all without God, then there is pride in that. And one day, Jesus will scatter you.

That's what's going on in the picture in verse 53. He has filled the hungry with good things, but has sent the rich away empty. I don't know if you could think back to a time when you've been really hungry.

I was thinking about this this week. I was trying to think of a time when I'd been really hungry. And the best I could come up with was Tom's wedding. My friend Tom got married, Barcelona, very glamorous.

It was probably the longest I've ever waited at a wedding for the wedding breakfast. The more and more I thought, why do they call it a breakfast? And we were in Barcelona, didn't get enough food, service was very long, photos, glamour, glamour, glamour.

[16:23] By the time the canapes came out, there was a group of us hanging by the door of the kitchen to get first grab of what was coming out. And I was thinking to myself, if that's the best example I can come up with of being really hungry, I'm a rich man in the picture, aren't I?

I'm a rich man. Most of us here, not everybody here, but most of us here in global terms are very rich. And we know there are people around the world right now who are very hungry and who will go to bed tonight thinking, I wish I had more food to eat.

It's why three times the Christmas number one has been Do They Know It's Christmas? to raise money for people in situations of famine. And while that's going on in our world today as a reality, picture the rich man of Mary's song going out for a slap-up dinner this Christmas at a restaurant with three Michelin stars.

He orders the seven-course meal. And as course after course is brought by the waiter, he tries a bit of each one and he leaves anything he doesn't like.

He's choosy because he can afford to be choosy. And God says in verse 53 that in sending Jesus he is turning the world upside down.

[17:44] Not yet, Jesus will come again in glory. But God is turning the world upside down. The hungry get filled with good things. The rich are sent away empty.

Why? It's not that having money is bad. That's not the case. It's not bad to have money. It's not that being poor is virtuous. It's not that either.

But the point that Luke makes here and again and again in his gospel is that there is a huge spiritual danger when you have money. It's the danger that you treat God like a waiter.

You know, like if, I don't know whether you're like me, when you've eaten out in a restaurant or a pub and the waiter comes over and says, would you like to see the dessert menu? Lots of us say a very similar thing.

We go, well, go on, we'll have a look. I'll have a look at the menu. And what we mean by that is, I don't really need dessert but let me see what you've got to offer me and I might go for something.

[18:45] I'll have a look. And I wonder if the danger with money is that's how we treat God. you think, I could manage just fine without God but by all means let's just have a look at the menu anyway.

See what God's going to serve me with and I'll see if I want to choose it. So you start thinking, who is this God that I should consider him instead of like Mary thinking, who am I that God would consider me?

And that's so dangerous to think like that. There was a Christian D.L. Moody who said this, God sends no one away except those who are full of themselves. So if in our pride in Glasgow with everything we have we start thinking that we get along fine without God then he won't be there for us.

It's not very sentimental this, is it? I don't know what you'll listen to this Christmas. Lots of our Christmas songs are very sentimental songs, aren't they? I was thinking about this. Chestnuts roasting on an open fire.

Make my wish come true, all I want for Christmas is you. It's beginning to look a lot like Christmas, toys in every store, but the prettiest sight to see is the holly that will be on your own front door.

[20:06] It's sentimental. But Mary's song is shockingly unsentimental. For here is God entering our world on a mission to turn the world upside down.

One writer says this, At Christmas the winds of God's grace are blowing, the winds of God's grace are blowing, they will either help you to sail or they will drive you to the rocks. You won't find that on a Christmas card this month, will you?

In fact, I was wondering, we've got such great artistic people at St. Silas, why doesn't one of you design a Christmas card that really reflects what God is doing in Mary's song. He is gathering the scattered, he is scattering the gathered.

But it is wonderful that he's doing that. I don't know whether you can see that, how wonderful that is. It's wonderful because we live in a world of sickening injustice. We live in a world of shocking inequality where in the global south people are dying in abject poverty and in the west we are swimming in wealth.

We live in a world where the news has reported this week that relief workers are surprised that the boats are still coming across the Med this month. They normally stop around this time because of the weather but the situation is so bad in Libya it's safer for people to get on the boats than to stay where they are.

[ 21 : 28 ] And we are part of a society where we pay footballers whatever we pay them while that's going on. It's extraordinary, isn't it, that we live in that kind of world. And God says to us, to everyone, come to me, trust my word of promise that one day the waiting will be over for all of this to be put right.

Jesus will come in glory, he will find the poor who've been waiting for him and he'll feed them with good things. He'll find the humble who've lived in fear of him and he will exalt them forever to live with him.

It's good news that God has a plan to do that. It's wonderful. But it's also such a very challenging message, isn't it, for us in the West.

Has your material comfort in Glasgow made you drift into being self-sufficient and thinking, I'll be fine just without God? Mary's song is a warning to us, a gracious warning.

Would you be willing to meet Jesus with humility? To remember, he is coming in glory to put the world right and so my only hope is in the manger.

[ 22 : 43 ] Christmas isn't just for the kids. This is my only hope where I see that Jesus has come to have mercy on me before he comes to sort the world out. So that's why, we've seen why Mary rejoices at Christmas.

We've heard what God is up to at Christmas. Thirdly, why is, well, how Mary finds fulfillment at Christmas. Now, I've used the word fulfilled even though it's not in the passage because that's a, it's a contemporary word, isn't it?

Everyone around us seems to be searching for fulfillment. We yearn to be satisfied, to be content. But really, that yearning is for what the Bible calls blessing.

Being blessed is about being happy because God has given your heart everything that you need and long for. And twice, that word is used by Elizabeth to describe Mary in verses 42 and 45.

Then she says of herself in verse 48, from now on, all generations will call me blessed. And she was right, wasn't she? She's probably the most painted woman in human history.

[ 23 : 52 ] The joy in her song shows us that she was given all the fulfillment that our hearts long for. So how did she get it? How did she find fulfillment?

Three things. First of all, by a faith in God's word. Elizabeth gives us the application for this morning's sermon in verse 45. Have a look. Blessed is she who has believed that the Lord would fulfill his promises to her.

Christian faith is so simple. You hear God's word, you trust it, and you get blessed. She believed what the angel had said in verse 37.

No word from God will ever fail. She knew God's word, she believed it, so God blessed her. It's good to remember that simplicity, isn't it?

Sometimes you can be talking to a Christian, perhaps one you don't know very well, and they start using language or jargon that you've never heard, and talking about things you've never experienced, and you can feel, oh, gosh, discouraged.

[ 24 : 59 ] Maybe you're missing out. But Mary's our model. She heard God's word, she trusted God's word, and God blessed her. And then Mary has burst into song, hasn't she?

So she's buzzing. She's actually taken that blessing, and she's owning it for herself, so that it overflows in that joy in her heart. So how did she nurture that in herself?

Well, as well as her faith in God's word, she's got a mind steeped in scripture. Steeping is what you do with tea, isn't it? You draw the goodness out of it. You put the bag in until the stuff's come out.

And when I was in London training to be a minister, the bishop of London used to turn up now and again while I was training, and several times when he turned up, he said, you must be steeped in scripture.

A very large man with this deep, you must be steeped in scripture. And we know that Mary was. Because she doesn't just say, I'm happy today because God is saving me.

[ 26 : 05 ] No, she says in verse 54, at last, God has remembered his promises to our ancestors. She connects what God is doing to her in sending Jesus with the unfolding plan of God.

Back in Genesis chapter 12, God promised that he would build his kingdom in the world through Abraham's descendants. Here it is being fulfilled what we've waited for. She's a Bible girl. And last year's cover version that was, last year's Christmas number one which we just heard was a cover version, wasn't it? Lots of Christmas number ones have been cover versions. people remake old songs.

And the first ever Christmas number one is a cover version. You know that? In 1 Samuel chapter one, there was another woman without a child, Hannah, and she was barren and she prayed and God gave her a child and he was a special child.

It was Samuel who was going to be a prophet for God, who would serve the Lord his whole life. And she burst into song in 1 Samuel chapter two. Listen to some of the lines and think about Mary's song that we've just been looking at.

[ 27 : 20 ] This is Hannah's song. There is no one holy like the Lord. Do not keep talking so proudly or let your mouth speak such arrogance for the Lord is a God who knows.

Those who are full hire themselves out for food, but those who are hungry are hungry no more. The Lord sends poverty and wealth. He humbles and he exalts.

So what's Mary really doing here in Luke chapter one? A deep well of joy in her heart is overflowing. So she takes a song from her Bible and she makes it her own song.

She knows this is so like what happened to Hannah. I should sing those words to God. She's steeped in Scripture.

So she knows her God and it brings a richness to her understanding of what God is doing in her.

And so with that comes blessing. It's easy to think these people who say, you know, you should know your Bible, you should read your Bible, that's just a preference.

[ 28 : 33 ] They're just Bible kind of people. They're just bookie people. But no, Mary's showing us it's the path to joy to know your Bible. No matter how long you've been a Christian, that's what you need the most.

That's what the teenagers in our church family need more than anything else. So Mary has a faith in God's Word. She has a mind steeped in Scripture.

And thirdly, because of that really, she has a gaze fixed on God. A lot's happened to Mary and I wonder if it was me, it couldn't really have been me, could it?

But if it was any of us in that kind of situation, we might start thinking, I'm pretty special. Let me tell you about me. And Mary does start with herself, doesn't she?

Verses 46 to 49, if you just look down, there's lots of me's and my's there as she looks at what God's done for her. But then from verse 50 onwards, it's all about him, isn't it?

[ 29 : 37 ] Did you notice that? His mercy for him. He has performed. He has scattered. He has brought down. He has filled. He has helped. Just as he promised.

Mary isn't looking at herself. She's looking at God. Now that she's grasped what God is doing in sending Christ, she fixes her gaze on his wonder and his beauty and his majesty.

Now when we're worried that we're not fulfilled or we're not happy, I don't know what you do, but what many of us do is we focus completely on ourselves.

We listen to our emotions and let them dictate and drive how we feel. Instead of talking to our feelings about the truth from God. Mary finds joy because she's not thinking about herself anymore. She doesn't need to. She knows God's mindful of me. I don't need to think about me. She's thinking about the God who blessed her. She's overwhelmed by who he is and what he's done. Like the Scottish pastor Robert Murray McShane said, for every one look within, take ten looks at him.

[ 30 : 51 ] So I don't know what's going to be Christmas number one. Of course I don't know. But could Mary's song be your song for the next few weeks? Could you invest spiritually in the way that she did knowing that deep joy is on offer if you do that?

Nurture a trust in God's word, a mind steeped in scripture, and a gaze fixed on God. For every one look within, ten looks at him.

Let's pray together. Father God, we thank you for the wonder of Christmas that in the Lord Jesus Christ we see your plan to oppose the proud, to dethrone rulers, to exalt the humble, to look on the lowly, to feed the hungry with good things.

To bless those who are waiting for you. Thank you that you have been mindful of us in sending Jesus to the manger that you would send him to the cross.

Help us to trust your testimony, to grow in our knowledge of your word, and to keep our gaze fixed on you for your glory, and also for our joy.  
[ 32 : 08 ] In Jesus' name, Amen. Amen.