



**SAINT THOMAS CHURCH FIFTH AVENUE**  
in the City of New York  
*The Reverend Canon Carl F. Turner, Rector*  
[www.SaintThomasChurch.org](http://www.SaintThomasChurch.org)

**Sunday, December 22, 2019**  
*The Fourth Sunday of Advent*

*Choral Eucharist*  
*at 11:00 a.m.*

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A Sermon by  
The Reverend Canon Carl F. Turner, *Rector*  
*on*  
Isaiah 7:10-16, Romans 1:1-7, and Matthew 1:18-25  
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### **Can I learn to sing Mary's song?**

Mary is known as the Mother of God – or ‘God-bearer’; the Greek word *Theotokos*.<sup>1</sup> A title given to her by the Council of Ephesus in 431, but a title that only makes sense in relation to her Son who is fully God and fully human. Everything we say about Mary points to Jesus and his saving work. The one who took shape in Mary's womb also wishes to live in each one of us: “Remember,” says the Lord, “I am with you always, to the end of the age.” (Matthew 28:20). God pours his grace into our lives just as he poured his grace into the life of Mary. Grace – undeserved and yet abundant. As a faithful parishioner of this church used to say – grace is *God's riches as Christ's expense*. We, too, can be filled with grace; we, too, can be God-bearers; we, too, can point to Jesus. In Mary's own words in Cana of Galilee at the wedding, “Do whatever he tells you.” (John 2:5).

And, like Mary, we can be overshadowed by the Holy Spirit so that our words and our actions are Christ-like and help build community where there was once estrangement - a reversal of what we read in Genesis: “I will put enmity between thee and the woman, and between thy seed and her seed; it shall bruise thy head, and thou shalt bruise his heel.” (Genesis 3:15).

Mary's ‘yes’ to God is an encouragement to each one of us to say ‘yes’ to God. “I will greatly rejoice in the Lord; my whole being shall exult in my God;” says Isaiah. (61:10) “My soul doth magnify the Lord, and my spirit hath rejoiced in God my Savior!” says Mary.

Mary points to her son and to the end of time when he will make all things new. Until that time comes, we are to live by her *Magnificat*:

*“He hath shewed strength with his arm;  
he hath scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts.  
He hath put down the mighty from their seats,  
and exalted them of low degree.  
He hath filled the hungry with good things;  
and the rich he hath sent empty away.”*

The Magnificat should never be taken for granted. It was, and remains, the Song of Mary and understanding her role in the economy of salvation will help us understand why this canticle remains at the heart of the evening office of the Church still to this day *and*, significantly, across many different traditions. The Magnificat reveals many things about Mary who, being a type of the Church or, one could say, a model

Christian, means that that same Magnificat reveals something about *our* Christian lives and *our* Christian journeys also.

So, the question is, **do I live my own life by the Magnificat?**

The Marist Father, Johann Rosten, says this, “*Mary’s song is the magna carta of any and all authentic faith experience. It is a description of the two columns upon which rests the weight of God’s grace in this world...Whenever God chooses to establish his dwelling-place in a human heart, he stamps it with two of his own characteristic features, that is, with the attitudes of thanksgiving and sharing. The first feature – thanksgiving - refers back to God in praise for His gift; the second feature helps us to reach out and share this gift with other human beings.*”<sup>2</sup>

My goodness! A Magna Carta of Faith experience! Never again should any of us see the Magnificat as simply a canticle of praise for which musicians have composed beautiful settings. We should remember that this is not the song of the Church (that is the Te Deum) it is the *Song of Mary*, a title that reminds us that these words emerge from *individual* faith experience and, therefore, should connect with *our own* faith experience for the building up of the Church.

As Archbishop Michael Ramsey once said: “*Mary gives us a pattern of Christian Living which echoes our own calling and our own journey with God.*”<sup>3</sup>

It means that her Magnificat is also, in some way, a canticle of encouragement and a pattern of Christian living:

- Our sense of **calling** by God – who am I – what does God want me to become?
- Our sense of **journeying** with God – through hard times as well as good.
- Our sense of **wonder** at glimpsing the glory of God – those moments when we can touch and feel God’s presence and are filled with his Spirit.
- Our **hope** for a share in that glory – so that not even the fear of death can prevent us from living in joyful expectation.

The Magnificat as the ‘Magna Carta’ of authentic faith experience is rooted in this dynamic between God and his chosen people – first between God and Mary – and now between God and you and me. As Michael Ramsey also used to say, “*It was by divine grace and human response, divine command and human obedience, that the incarnation happened and God’s new creation was begun.*”<sup>3</sup>

### **Divine grace and human response; Divine command and human obedience.**

This is not new to us – it is reflected in our baptismal covenant:

*Do you turn to Jesus Christ and accept him as your Savior?  
Do you put your whole trust in his grace and love?  
Do you promise to follow and obey him as your Lord?*<sup>4</sup>

The Magnificat as the ‘Magna Carta’ of authentic faith experience is rooted in this dynamic between God and his chosen people – first between God and Mary – and now between God and you and me. (Divine grace and human response; Divine command and human obedience.)

St Ambrose reminds us that Mary’s song can become our song too through participation in that Song: “*In the heart of each one may Mary praise the Lord, in each may the spirit of Mary rejoice in the Lord*”<sup>5</sup>.

And by participating in that song, that Magna Carta of faith experience, we magnify the Lord. We might think that this will make us small or insignificant, recognizing that we are nothing in the presence of the Lord. But the most amazing thing happens: When we live by the Magnificat, God actually *raises us up* and makes us blessed - makes us *great* through a reflection of his redeeming love streaming through our lives, as the sun sometimes pours through an open window. The Magnificat is the beginning of our journey but also reveals something of its destination. Let me end with some words of Archbishop Rowan Williams:

*“And so [Mary] says also that 'he that is mighty hath magnified me'. As she gives room to God, God makes her greater. What could be a more vivid illustration of how wrong and silly it is to think that God and humanity are somehow in competition? As if the more God there were, the less humanity there could be. But when Mary gives room to God, God gives room to her: her humanity blossoms into its fullest glory. Learn to give God room and you realize that what has to be cleared away to make room for him isn't your real humanity but all that has stopped you being human, all that makes you less than you could be. On the far side of the terrible, forbidding, draining business of letting go of your expectations, your safety and your possessions lies more not less of life.”<sup>6</sup>*

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<sup>1</sup>. Θεοτόκος

<sup>2</sup>. From 'Magnificat Reflection' – University of Dayton website: Father Johann G. Roten, S.M.

<sup>3</sup>. From 'Be still and know' – Michael Ramsey.

<sup>4</sup>. The 1979 Book of Common Prayer pp. 302-303

<sup>5</sup>. From St. Ambrose's Commentary on Luke's Gospel.

<sup>6</sup>. Sermon preached by the Archbishop of Canterbury at the National Pilgrimage to the Shrine of our Lady of Walsingham, Monday, May 31, 2004.