

HUMBLE STRENGTH¹

A sermon preached by Michael Horsburgh AM in St James' Church, King Street, Sydney, at Choral Evensong on the Second Sunday of Easter, 7 April 2024

An early Easter brings with it the possibility that the Feast of the Annunciation will conflict with Holy Week or the Triduum. Sometimes, the feast can fall on Good Friday, provoking John Donne's famous poem "Upon the Annunciation and Passion Falling upon One Day".² This conjunction last happened in 2016 but will not recur until 2157. I will not take the opportunity to comment on the conjunction farther, except to note that Mary's appearance in the gospels begins with the Annunciation, which we have transferred from the Monday in Holy Week to tomorrow. She is still there, with the small group of women and one lone male disciple at the foot of the cross. As Donne says:

Gabriel gives Christ to her, He her to John ...

But it is to the conjunction of our Old Testament passages that I want to turn this evening. They are our two psalms, the Magnificat, and the excerpt from Proverbs. Together, they point to the combination of strength and humility.

We should begin with the Magnificat. It is one of three poems from Luke's birth narrative that we frequently use. One of them, *Nunc Dimittis*, we have also sung this evening. The other, Zechariah's *Benedictus*, is a canticle for morning prayer. No scholars claim that the speakers themselves wrote these poems, but they emerged early in the church's history as words expressing the significance of the persons and their roles in the narrative. They are complex poems full of biblical references to God, God's actions, and the responses of God's people. Putting such words into the mouths of significant people was a proper thing to do at the time, not wrong as we would now suppose.

We might bridle a little at the words put into Mary's mouth when she seems to describe herself as a handmaiden or servant. Such a description may seem redolent of the history of the displacement of women in the church, which history is not yet past.

These sentiments appear also in tonight's two psalms, which describe us as servants watching the hands of their masters and mistresses or as newly weaned children. They are repeated in Philip Doddridge's hymn, "Ye servants of the Lord":

Watch! 'tis your Lord's command,
and while we speak, he's near;
mark the first signal of his hand,
and ready all appear.³

As, however, we read on in the Magnificat, we notice a change in tone. The humble servant begins strongly to proclaim the strength of the Lord in supporting justice and equity. The mighty are cast down, the proud humbled. These proclamations are redolent of the song of Hannah, the mother of Samuel:

¹ Readings: Psalms 123, 131; Proverbs 8:1-21; Matthew 1:18-23

² [Ave et Consummatum est – The World is Quiet Here \(thomryng.com\)](https://www.thomryng.com)

³ *New English Hymnal* 18

The Lord makes poor and makes rich;
he brings low, he also exalts.
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.⁴

Hannah was also the chosen mother of a special son, making her hymn the appropriate model for Mary's. Although Mary spoke of what God was doing, the proclamation itself was a dangerous one in a land occupied by a ruthless oppressor, as our Good Friday celebration has reminded us.

The most striking of this evening's passages is, however, from Proverbs speaking of Wisdom. We might be inclined to dismiss Proverbs as simply a collection of folk sayings. We might find it hard to distinguish between the dross and the diamonds. It is, however, based around a "two-way" approach to life that contrasts folly with wisdom, the "way of life with the way of death"⁵ Proverbs begins with such a thought:

The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge;
fools despise wisdom and instruction.⁶

In the chapter before our reading, we find a young man approached on the street by an attractive prostitute who seeks to divert his path into her ways. Various commentators have named her "Dame Folly".⁷ This section is not just about sexual ethics; it uses sexual desire as a symbol of the temptations of folly. Chapter 8, part of which we have read, contrasts Dame Folly with "Lady Wisdom". Wisdom lies behind the call for justice echoed in the words of Hannah's hymn and the Magnificat.

Two things are notable here. First, although Folly is female, so also is Wisdom. There is no characterisation of woman as weak and duplicitous in contrast with male strength and uprightness. Here, woman inhabits both realms, as do we all.

Second. It is unfortunate that our reading did not include two more verses:

The Lord created me at the beginning of his work,
the first of his acts of long ago.
Ages ago I was set up,
at the first, before the beginning of the earth.⁸

This reference to wisdom being there at the start has led various theologians to link it with either the Son or the Holy Spirit as parts of the Trinity. If the Holy Spirit, the description of wisdom as female has been attractive to feminist theologians. If also the Holy Spirit, we remember Mary as being present at Pentecost. If the Son, the linking of wisdom to Mary his mother strengthens our understanding of her place in Christian history. Her acceptance of her role as mother and her continuous strength throughout the life of her son and afterwards

⁴ 1 Samuel 2: 7-8

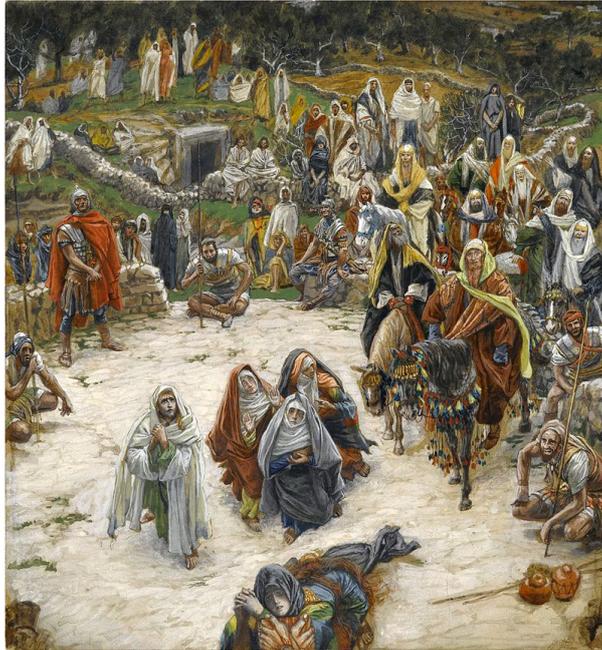
⁵ Jeremiah 21:8

⁶ Proverbs 1:7

⁷ Daniel J Trier, *Proverbs and Ecclesiastes*, Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible, Grand Rapids, Brazos, 2011, pp. 99-125

⁸ Proverbs 8:22-23

encourage us to see her as both aware of her created position and strong in the wisdom attributed to her. Whether we are male or female, she is the ultimate discipleship model.



What our Lord Jesus Saw from the Cross
John Tissot
Brooklyn Museum



Madonna of the Magnificat
Botticelli 1481
Uffizi, Florence



Lady Wisdom
Anton Raphael Mengs 1774



The Holy Spirit as Female
Medieval Fresco
St. Jakobus Church, Urschalling, Germany