

There are a surprising number of songs in the Bible. You probably don't recognise them as such because they don't come with the music score- if you can read the little squiggly tadpole things- or with one a tiny tinny christmas card micro chip that tinkles the tune if you can't. When they come up in the readings at church the lector doesn't suddenly turn into Julie Andrews (I suspect church is already camp enough) even in churches with convents attached. Those dedicated few who have audiobook Bibles can tell you that the reader doesn't burst into song when someone in the Bible does, they just keep reading as written, serious and respectfully po-faced. But even if you accept that nobody's ever going to step up to the lectern like they're auditioning for the X Factor, flat on the page, the Bible's songs don't really seem like, well, songs. Reading a Bible ditty is not like reading the lyrics in Smash Hits. Partly that's because they're translations into English of very different languages- principally Hebrew, some Greek and a spattering of Aramaic- and partly because different cultures had different ideas of what constituted verse and thus what constituted a song. So, for example, outside of some specialist classical music, what we recognise as a song has a regular metre- it's roughly the same number of words or syllables each verse and you repeat those verses over and over again. It might even rhyme. On the other hand Hebrew verse- the Psalms say- are not based on regular metres and never intentionally rhyme. The Hebrew language makes verse using parallelism. I'll explain: so the first half of your verse says something, then the second half says something complementary, or the same thing in different words, or the opposite thing. So, your first part might be 'This preacher is really boring'. And your second half might be 'What a tedious guy' 'Don't worry it'll soon be time for lunch' or 'Nonsense, this is the best homily ever'. Parallelism is easily explained but it does make the Bible songs quite a challenge to singers trying to fit the square peg of psalmody into the round hole of Western patterns of music, the solutions being either change the peg- basically hymns like 'The Lord's my shepherd' or change the hole- things like the bane and beauty of choirs everywhere, Anglican Chant.

Anyway, even if they don't leap out at us when we're reading them saying 'Sing me', songs there are in the Bible and lots of them to boot.

What Bible scholars think is probably the very earliest part of the bible to be written, is a song, the song of Miriam. Unfortunately when first performed it was accompanied by massed tambourines, but we sing it every year, without percussion, at the Easter vigil service, it's the one about 'the horse and rider he has thrown into the sea'. It's a celebratory, gloating, victory song (there are quite a lot of those in the Bible tune book): probably it's nearest modern equivalent would be 'We are the

champions' mixed with 'Another one bites the dust.' Which may or may not make for a more interesting dawn vigil, depending on your taste, or lack of thereof.

There are love songs of course- the Song of Songs is the prime example. We might like to think of that extended homage to hormones as Barry White on steroids channelling purple prose. Most of the psalms if written in the last century would be of the genre that typically starts something like 'Woke up this morning, blues round my head'. That sort of thing. With an occasional bit of swearsy Sex Pistols thrown in when things get too much for the psalmist. There are laments and sad songs, dirges and elegies: think Celine Dion in a tea towel crooning My Heart will Go on and you're pretty much there.

There are the songs of heaven accompanied by clouds of incense described in Revelation which, like most of that book, would be best imagined as some of Pink Floyd's weirder moments accompanied not by billows of frankincense but herbal tobacco smoke.

And then, I've finally got to it, there is the song for today, the Magnificat, the Song of Mary completing our contemporary performance of Bible: The Musical. And in that show Mary's song would have to put on modern drag as Ch ch ch ch changes...

The Magnificat is a rich seam to be mined: it has survived being sung by the church every evening for hundreds and hundreds of years and still never sounds stale or tired, even if some of the tunes it's been set to do. And the irony, or paradox if you like, is that this song which all this time remains the same is a song that is at heart about change. Major change. Not trying a new hair style change or switching broadband provider change or having a takeaway tonight for a change, change. We're talking world shattering life changing revolutionary change.

That sounds scary. Even if you're living the most rubbish of lives we all tend to believe the line about 'better the devil you know' which each and every time we say it is a terrible line. A devil is a devil after all whether you know it or not. So it might well be scary, but this change is all about God entering the picture, and, to be honest, that really should just be a little scary. If you're not just a tiny bit flustered at the thought, then maybe it's not God that thought's about.

And. And, what do you expect? Would you imagine that God will enter into the picture, come into your life, break into the world, and ...erm, everything stays the same? Nothing changes? Not even a tiny bit? Of course not.

When God touches our lives, they change. When God touches the world it changes.

So, today we're right on the cusp of change, just about to tip into Christmas. Elizabeth's baby's leaping in the womb and Mary's singing her song of change. Though when Mary's baby arrives it will appear to have changed nothing- after all the birth of a baby is not exactly an unusual event in human history. It's one of the necessary preconditions for that history continuing. Nothing unusual about that, no change there. But though this is a baby that looks, sounds, feels, and smells like any other baby, his birth changes everything. And so will his life, and so will his death.

And though Mary cannot see into the future, she doesn't know what will happen when the baby she is now carrying emerges into the world, she knows that change is coming. She is filled with the Holy Spirit, she is a prophet, a queen among the prophets, she is seeing God at work in the world and she's telling the world what she sees. She cannot know- except in the very vaguest terms- what the change will be, and like most great change it will be the case here that we only really knew what's happened some time afterwards. So even if the details are at this stage unknown and unknowable; given that she is now pregnant without the usual preconditions, which is a pretty radical change in itself, and even if nobody will believe her about that- they won't yet and a lot of people still don't- Mary knows the deal and the deal is we're looking at big time major league change.

And she's really not scared. Excited, yes. It's not always easy to tell the difference from the outside, but Mary is excited not afraid. Because the change that is a-coming is coming from God, and how can that be anything other than good?

Change is coming.

From God.

All these years later- two thousand or so- we're still singing Mary's song. That we're still singing it doesn't mean she was wrong and change never came. Boy, did the world change. But we're still singing the song because the world is still changing, still needs to change, God is still changing the world, still hearts are being turned to

God, still pride is being scattered, still rich coffers are being emptied, still injustices are being righted

And, because you know as well as I do that this is no perfect world, because this is a world where we can look around and too often ask ourselves 'where *is* God in all of this' because in this world we do not yet see the full consummation of the promise of Mary's song, because of these we know there is yet more change to come. God's change.

Now that, is something to look forward to.

Ch ch ch ch changes!