

303 *An amazing young lady*

As Protestants, we're so wary of Mariolatry that we can easily miss what an amazing lady Mary was. Against all the odds, she recognised the signs – when heaven came to earth – and said, 'Yes, I'll do my part'. She stood in the gap between heaven and earth and helped God's kingdom to come to earth.

The odds? It had been *four hundred* years since God had last spoken by the prophets, and the religious elite were always on about avoiding going to hell by what you believe and do. Mary clearly knew God's desire to restore things on earth: read her response!^{Lk 1:46-55}

Thirty years later, in the same religious climate, Jesus stood in the gap, bringing the kingdom of heaven to earth, bringing healing, joy and forgiveness, and restoring people. And some realised that this was the Real Deal. But religion fulfilled its part in God's Big Plan by arranging Jesus' death. Yet, through his death, Jesus defeated death and secured The Way for heaven to come to earth.

And The Way (the first followers of Jesus), after his resurrection and ascension, again stood in the gap, bringing heaven's restoration to earth. And the movement spread like wildfire, despite the best efforts of organised religion.

And then? [Major overstatement warning!] For 2000 years, there's been a constant battle between God's Big Plan to bring heaven to earth and organised religion trying to control the gateway through which people could escape from earth and get to heaven.

We look back to the Reformation and applaud the break from corrupt religion. But as religion grew up around Protestantism, we lost sight of bringing the kingdom of heaven to earth. There were various revivals – which brought people into church – but a lot of it was on the back of the concept of (not) going to hell and instead going to heaven, away from the mess here on earth. (But yes, much earthly good came too: care for the poor, etc.)

And the Charismatic revival? It brought people back to church, as we rediscovered God's heavenly gifts. What for? Do you remember 'power evangelism'? God's plan seemed to be that people we would be convinced of the truth by seeing miracles happening. But it was still about 'going to heaven', more than our standing in the gap to bring heaven to earth.

When I started on my recent journey, I mentioned my excitement on reading, in Richard Rohr's book,¹ that our religion had become (under the influence of the Enlightenment?) 'propositional and transactional', instead of 'relational and mysterious.'^[2,15]² And I also recognised that it had become way too individualistic, following the culture of the age: it was about, 'I'm going to heaven – you can come too'.

I've come to believe that God's Big Plan (starting with Abraham) is to bring individuals to faith so that we can work together to bring heaven's restoration to earth – now, but also knowing that ultimately God will fully restore it when Jesus returns.

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¹ *The Divine Dance*. Actually, the statement was in the foreword by William P. Young of *The Shack* fame.

² My son Tim recently said that those *same four words* related to his secular work on the future of education!!