

2. Dalit Madonna sings the Magnificat – a Song of Transition

The image we are using to illustrate our next Bible Study may already be familiar to you. This is now part of the Methodist Church Collection of Modern Christian Art and was on the front cover of the 2003-2004 Methodist Prayer Handbook “Cradle of Life” It is painted by an Indian artist called Jyoti Sahi and is called Dalit Madonna. The word “dalit” means broken and is the name given to the so-called “untouchables” in Indian society who are completely outside the caste system.

And so as we remember those who are broken and oppressed in the world today let us hear Mary’s song of transition and transformation – the Magnificat.

LUKE 1:46-55

When I was sent to train for the ministry at Queen’s, I was not only looking forward to meeting Magdalen! I was also excited by the possibility of being able to spend a term at TTS – the Tamil Nadu Theological Seminary in South India. Queen’s had an exchange programme with TTS and each year an Indian student would come and spend a term with us in Birmingham and a British student would go and spend a term in Madurai. I had the privilege of being that student in my final year.

TTS has a special ministry with Dalits. The caste system is so ingrained into Indian society that even when people make the transition from Hinduism to Christianity their caste makes that transition with them. There are still churches where people refuse to drink from the same communion cup as a Dalit and will certainly refuse to accept a Dalit as their minister.

According to the Rig Veda, sacred texts that date back to oral traditions of more than 3,000 years ago, the different castes emerged from various parts of the body of the first man whom Brahma created from clay. Each group had a function in sustaining the life of society-- the social body. Brahmins, or priests, were created from the mouth.

They were to provide for the intellectual and spiritual needs of the community. Kshatriyas, warriors and rulers, were derived from the arms. Their role was to rule and to protect others. Vaishyas--landowners and merchants--sprang from the thighs, and were entrusted with the care of commerce and agriculture. Shudras--artisans and servants--came from the feet. Their task was to perform all manual labor. Dalits were the lowest of the low – emerging from below the feet and have always been expected to do all the tasks which are associated with dirt and excrement.

Dalit women in India are oppressed at three levels. They are poor; they are women; and they are Dalits. I can remember being able to spot the Dalit women on the bus because they were the ones who were not allowed to wear sari blouses and were constantly struggling to maintain a sense of decency and keep their breasts covered. They are also very vulnerable to sexual exploitation and trafficking – even within their own community. For Dalit men the suppression and rape of women helps to compensate for their own lack of power in society.

For many Indians “Dalit Madonna” would be a contradiction in terms. How could God choose someone so lowly to be the mother of Christ? And yet that is exactly what God does. Mary may not have been an outcast but she was certainly not from the upper echelons of society either. Her song of praise – the Magnificat – is an anthem for Dalits and all oppressed people everywhere as it celebrates how God has brought down the powerful from their thrones and lifted up the lowly; how God has filled the hungry with good things and sent the rich away empty.

Britain does not have the formal caste system which India does. Nevertheless there are still different layers within our society and ways of measuring status. Our gender, our postcode, our ethnicity – to give just a few examples – can either open or close doors to us. Our work, our education, our motherhood – or the lack of any of these - all affect the way in which we are viewed by others. Our marital status is precisely that - a status!

How much freedom do we actually have to move on? How easy is it to make the transition from council flat to own home; from unemployed to employed; from virgin to mother?

Jyoti Sahi's painting is a very fertile image. The Madonna is holding the fruit of her womb. She sits in a field of wheat with a sunflower growing by her side. The image has arisen out of an Indian folk symbol - the grinding stone, which is often set in the courtyard of traditional Indian homes. It consists of two stones, one fixed and stable, known as the Mother Stone. This generally has a hollow part carved out of its centre, into which fits a smaller seed or egg-shaped stone known as the Baby Stone. The Baby Stone is free to move about, and is used to grind various foodstuffs which are placed in the hollow of the Mother Stone. The baby and the mother stones together can enable wheat to make the transition into bread – but in order to make that transition the wheat has to be crushed and broken – as the word Dalit expresses.

This is an image of both life and death. And it seems to me that we often sing and read the Magnificat as a song of praise for what God has already accomplished and forget that there are many people in the world today who still long to make the transition from oppressed to blessed; from empty to filled; from virgin to mother.

Dalit Madonna

1. What is your favourite hymn or worship song and why?
2. What gives you status in society? What denies you status in society?
3. Who are the “dalits” in your church/community?
4. When have you felt broken and oppressed?
5. What transitions in your life are you still longing to make?