

An upside down adventure 19 December 2021 (Advent 4)

BIBLE READINGS

Isaiah 12:2-6

Surely God is my salvation;

I will trust and not be afraid.

The Lord, the Lord himself, is my strength and my song;
he has become my salvation.'

**With joy you will draw water
from the wells of salvation.**

In that day you will say:

'Give praise to the Lord, proclaim his name;
**make known among the nations what he has done,
and proclaim that his name is exalted.**

Sing to the Lord, for he has done glorious things;
let this be known to all the world.

**Shout aloud and sing for joy, people of Zion,
for great is the Holy One of Israel among you.'**

Luke 1:39-55

In those days Mary got ready and hurried to a town in the hill country of Judea, where she entered Zechariah's home and greeted Elizabeth. When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the baby leaped in her womb, and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. In a loud voice she exclaimed: 'Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the child you will bear! But why am I so favoured, that the mother of my Lord should come to me? As soon as the sound of your greeting reached my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy. Blessed is she who has believed that the Lord would fulfil his promises to her!'

And Mary said:

'My soul glorifies the Lord
and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour,
for he has looked with favour
on the lowly state of his servant.

From now on all generations will call me blessed,
for the Mighty One has done great things for me –
holy is his name.

His mercy extends to those who fear him,
from generation to generation.

He has performed mighty deeds with his arm;
he has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts.

He has brought down rulers from their thrones
but has lifted up the lowly.

He has filled the hungry with good things
but has sent the rich away empty.

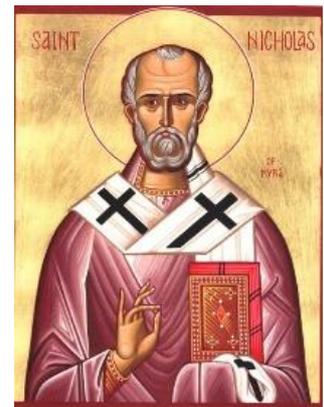
He has helped his servant Israel,
remembering to be merciful

to Abraham and his descendants for ever,
just as he promised our ancestors.'

MESSAGE An upside down adventure

In our family, due to extended family being non-Christians, we have struggled over the years to separate our celebration of **Christmas** from what our culture calls **Xmas** and the **holiday season**. Our consumerist culture is hard to resist at this time of year but we have always tried to remember the birth of Jesus at Christmas as separate to society's celebration of Xmas. Both celebrations happen to occur on the same day – 25th December – which also marks the start of the holiday season for many people.

But there is pressure to conform to society's norms and to give presents to family members at Christmas. We try to separate this gift giving from Christmas by doing it either on **6th December – St Nicholas Day** which remembers the generous gifts given by a 4th century Greek Bishop called Nicholas to a poor family – from which the tradition of SinterKlaas or Santa Claus developed ...



or we give gifts on **6th January** which is **Epiphany**, when the wise men presented their gifts to Jesus.

Even this separation doesn't quite work because our culture has twisted the meaning of Christmas – turning it upside down – so that rather than a celebration of what **God** has done for us, the gift that **God** has given to the world in Jesus Christ – Christmas has become the excuse to give ourselves and family members extravagant gifts that advertising tempts us to buy that have nothing to do with Christ.

In keeping with our focus during Advent that this season is an invitation to begin an **adventure** with God, I've called today's message **An upside down adventure**.

In today's Gospel story, Luke recounts how two strands of the Advent story come together when Mary, the mother-to-be of Jesus, visits Elizabeth, the mother-to-be of John the Baptist.

How does this come about? You may recall that towards the end of Gabriel's encounter with Mary, Gabriel informs Mary that her 'relative' Elizabeth is six months pregnant with John. So the two women are related to each other in some way, though they may not be cousins as is sometimes suggested.



Mary may well have been seeking someone to talk to and debrief with after her encounter with Gabriel and after the power of the Holy Spirit comes upon her ... as I imagine conversations with her own parents and with Joseph were rather strained ...

... yes I'm pregnant ... but Joseph isn't the father ...

... all this is actually **God's** doing!

... Yeah, sure Mary ... as if!

So Mary seeks out Elizabeth and when they meet something special happens. As Mary greets Elizabeth, the baby John leaps in Elizabeth's womb. Filled with God's Spirit and with joy, Elizabeth recognises that God is doing something special through both herself and especially through Mary, whom she calls the mother of 'my Lord', a later designation for Jesus that picks up his close connection with God, who is also called Lord.

Elizabeth proclaims that Mary is the most blessed among women for she believed God's word to her and will bear God's son, who will become Elizabeth's 'Lord'.

Then Mary herself speaks – or sings – about the **blessing** she has received and how God – the Mighty One – has done **great things for her** ... which all seems rather upside down if you stop and think about it.



Mary is perhaps 14 years old, is pregnant but not yet married. Think how you might react if your daughter or granddaughter was in a similar position ... I'm not sure if slut-shaming was a thing back in those days, but I suspect there was a fair amount of social stigma attached to being a young unwed mother, all the more when rumours started to circulate about how she became pregnant. Have you heard the one about Mary?! Wink, wink, nudge, nudge!

No wonder she wanted to escape from Nazareth for a while.

In such circumstances it seems upside down for her to be declaring how **blessed** she is and how God has looked with **favour** on her. It requires great faith to see beyond her own personal challenges to what God will accomplish through her child.

Mary is certainly blessed with great faith, as Elizabeth comments.



But the upside down nature of God's new adventure goes well beyond Mary herself.



She sings of how God has scattered the **proud** and brought down the **powerful** from their thrones while lifting up the **lowly** and **humble**.

The **rich** will be sent away empty while the **hungry** – the **poor** – will be filled with good things.

Israel – the descendants of Abraham – will be blessed while other larger more powerful empires like Rome, presumably, will be brought low.

Mary is no demure or meek figure as she is often depicted in Christian art. What she speaks about is a great **reversal**, an **overturning of injustice**, a new **dawn**.

It's a radical and **subversive** vision of the world.

Her words are a foretaste of the message of Jesus ...

*'The Spirit of the Lord is upon me.
He has anointed me to bring good news to the poor.'* (Luke 4:18-19)

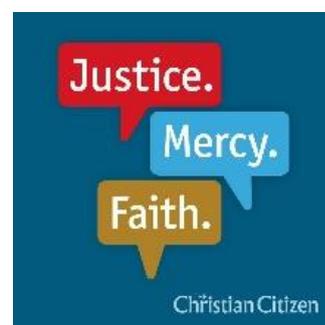
*'Blessed are you who are poor for yours is the kingdom of God.
Blessed are you who are hungry now for you will be filled.
Blessed are you who weep now for you will be filled with joy.'* (Luke 6:20-21)

Mary's words are also fulfilled in Jesus' actions such as feeding the multitudes – which is the most recorded of all Jesus' mighty deeds in the Gospels and thus seen as particularly significant.

I want to briefly highlight three aspects of this upside down adventure that Mary speaks about.

First is that the message of Advent – and the message of Christmas – and indeed the message of Jesus – is not all sentimental and sweet. Yes we can speak of **hope, peace joy and love**, but these are tightly entwined with God's call for **justice and mercy**.

These concepts belong together. We cannot **love** our neighbour unless we also seek **justice** for our neighbour ... whether this takes the form of justice for indigenous peoples, or justice for asylum seekers, or justice for the world's poor to have access to Covid vaccines.



Second, some Christians hear the words of Mary's song as a call to social revolution or perhaps a call to take up radical left-wing politics and to overthrow elected governments. Liberation theology that originated in Latin America sometimes takes this stance – and certainly the imagery in Mary's words is of God as a mighty warrior overturning social norms.

But the point is that this is **God's** work ...

God will scatter the proud and bring down the powerful,

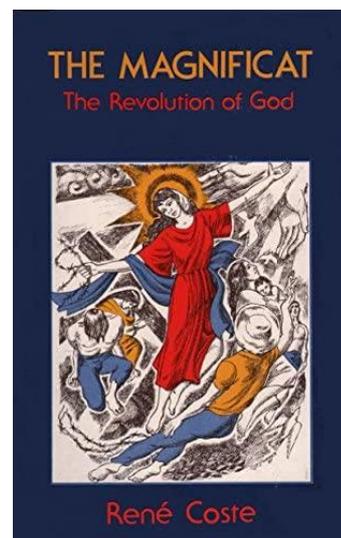
God will send the rich away empty,

God will raise the lowly and feed the hungry,

as we see time and again through the ministry of Jesus.

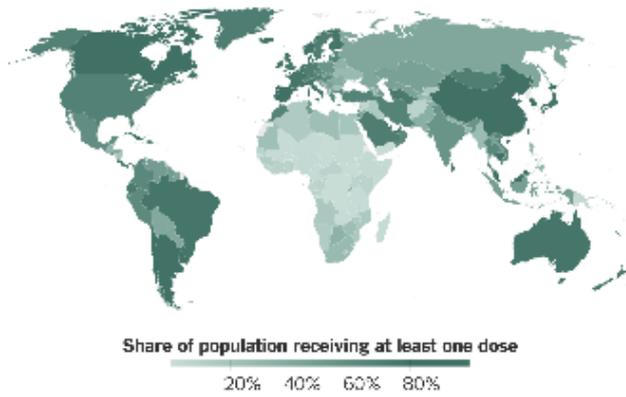
We can **follow** God's lead but we are not called to violent revolution.

Mary's words suggest that the change needed comes in people's **hearts** and in their inner thoughts. These need to change and become guided by compassion and mercy and justice rather than by greed and power and selfishness. This change is God's work that happens through God's Holy Spirit changing us from the inside out.



Finally, it doesn't take too much imagination or experience of the world to know that the rich and powerful will not easily lay down their privileges.

Why are Australia and other wealthy countries buying so many Covid vaccines rather than sharing them with poor countries?



Is it because we actually need 100 million vaccine doses next year?

I don't think so.

No, we are buying excess vaccines because we are a rich and often selfish country and we want to protect ourselves four times over ... plus we don't want to risk harming our relationship with the big pharmaceutical companies making the vaccines by pushing for a waiver on intellectual property rights so the drugs can be made more cheaply in other

countries.

As is often the case, the poor in places like PNG, the Philippines & Africa miss out.

It was similar in Jesus' day. The radical message of Mary – and the later message of Jesus – was strongly resisted by people in positions of power and wealth – whether the ruling Romans, or puppet rulers like King Herod or the priests who ran the temple in Jerusalem. None would give up their privilege and so eventually they seek – together – to silence and kill Jesus, whose message was dangerous for those in power.

Mary – faith-filled Mary – prophetic Mary – sings of a vision for a transformed world where God's justice rules and the poor and hungry are fed. In her mind it is already as good as accomplished. These courageous and visionary words of a world turned upside down come from the mouth of a 14 year girl. In our day, it's a little like the visionary and prophetic words that come from the mouth of another teenage girl, Greta Thunberg, on climate change.

As we head towards Christmas, God is inviting us afresh into a new adventure that will turn the world upside down. Taking up this adventure will have personal implications – as there were for Mary – and as we work together it will also have implications for our communities and even for our politics.

Do we have the faith and the courage to see God's kingdom coming among us and turning the world on its head as this next song explores?

SONG Canticle of the turning

My soul cries out with a joyful shout
 that the God of my heart is great,
 and my spirit sings of the wondrous things
 that you bring to the ones who wait.
 You fixed your sight on your servant's plight,
 and my weakness you did not spurn,
 so from east to west shall my name be blest.
 Could the world be about to turn?
My heart shall sing of the day you bring.
Let the fires of your justice burn.
Wipe away all tears, for the dawn draws near,
and the world is about to turn!

Though I am small, my God, my all,
 you work great things in me,

and your mercy will last from the depths
of the past to the end of the age to be.
Your very name puts the proud to shame,
and to those who would for you yearn,
you will show your might, put the strong to flight,
for the world is about to turn.

Refrain

From the halls of power to the fortress tower,
not a stone will be left on stone.

Let the king beware for your justice tears
ev'ry tyrant from his throne.

The hungry poor shall weep no more,
for the food they can never earn;
there are tables spread, ev'ry mouth be fed,
for the world is about to turn.

Refrain

Though the nations rage from age to age,
we remember who holds us fast;

God's mercy must deliver us
from the conqueror's crushing grasp.

This saving word that our forebears heard
is the promise which holds us bound,
'til the spear and rod can be crushed by God,
who is turning the world around.

Refrain

Words Rory Cooney © 1990 GIA Publications. All rights reserved. Used with permission.