

“...The heart of the sons of men is full of evil, and madness is in their heart while they live...” (Ecclesiastes 9:3)

*Wherewith shall I come before the LORD,
and bow myself before the high God?*

*He hath shewed thee, O man, what is good;
and what doth the LORD require of thee,
but to do justly, and to love mercy,
and to walk humbly with thy God? (Micah 6.6,8)*

Jesus’ surprising reversals—part 1

a mother’s intuition: of the mighty and rich, the low and the hungry

Luke 1.46-55

⁴⁶And Mary said,

“My soul doth magnify the Lord,

⁴⁷And my spirit hath rejoiced in God my Saviour.

⁴⁸For he hath regarded the low estate of his handmaiden:

for, behold, from henceforth all generations shall call me blessed.

⁴⁹For he that is mighty hath done to me great things;

and holy is his name.

⁵⁰And his mercy is on them that fear him

from generation to generation.

⁵¹He hath shewed strength with his arm;

he hath scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts.

⁵²He hath put down the mighty from their seats,

and exalted them of low degree.

⁵³He hath filled the hungry with good things;

and the rich he hath sent empty away.

⁵⁴He hath holpen his servant Israel,

in remembrance of his mercy;

⁵⁵As he spake to our fathers,

to Abraham, and to his seed for ever.”

introduction to the series

Today’s homily is the first in a series of homilies entitled: “Jesus’ Surprising Reversals.”

This series of homilies will focus on the Gospel of Luke, as he among the Gospel writers best epitomizes this theme. Or so it seems to me.

In this series of homilies, we will examine how Jesus challenged, resisted, and—at least in his own life and ministry—reversed the world’s value system, especially as it weighed and still to this day weighs, the worth of individuals, or, in the language of the Doctrine and Covenants, “the worth of souls.”¹ In challenging, resisting, and reversing the world’s twisted value system, Jesus will surprise us by the individuals with whom he associates and the individuals whom he holds up as role models. He will also surprise us by being critical of those whom society thought of as heroic and looked to as role models. We will watch as Jesus brings a reversal of fortune to those whom he serves and a changing of the guard when it comes to role models of discipleship.

I might have named this series, “Jesus’ *Offensive* Reversals,” for his reversals often offended those who witnessed them—in word or deed. However, Jesus’ reversals as recorded by Luke were intended to do more than surprise. And they offended only to the degree that they challenged, resisted, and reversed the world’s value system, especially as it weighs the worth of individuals.

I believe, in fact, that Jesus’ challenge to and reversal of the world’s value system belongs near the top of any list concerning the purposes and objectives of his life, his teaching, and his ministry as a whole. Even more recognized and appreciated aspects of Jesus’ ministry—his healings, for example, or his teachings, or even his atoning sacrifice, death, and following resurrection, ascension, and enthronement—even these represent a challenge to and reversal of the world’s influences and values.

Jesus’ challenges to the world’s value system, however, are about more than simple ethics, as important as those are. They go beyond matters of how mortal beings conduct themselves *visa via* others while living on this telestial planet. His challenges are more far reaching than the temporal existence of this world. His challenges to the world’s current value systems have applications to the cosmos and how immortal beings exist and endure in the eternal

¹ DC 18.¹⁰

realms. And, as always in Jesus' intentions, they teach us something of the character of God, Himself.

a mother's intuition

I have commented on today's text numerous times. Jesus' mother seems to have shared our view that the reversal of the world's value system was as central to Jesus' life and ministry as any other purpose. In her famous Magnificat uttered in the presence of her cousin, Elisabeth, she makes no mention of the more traditional appreciations of her son's ministry. Rather, in her Magnificat, Mary discerns that God will work through her son to reveal, challenge, and reverse the world's distorted value systems.

“He hath put down the mighty from their seats,
and exalted them of low degree.
He hath filled the hungry with good things;
and the rich he hath sent empty away.”

Mary's Magnificat, then, could be thought of as a kind of Divine mission call or mission statement issued to Jesus through his mother. How often did Mary remind Jesus of the call and mission to which God had ordained him?

Mary, of course, could utilize her own experiences as evidence of God's intent to bring about startling reversals. As the world judged things—and as she judged things under its influence—Mary was a woman of “low estate.” But, much to her surprise, she had “found favour with God.” God reversed the way she would be thought of and remembered, as “all generations” would call her “blessed.”

Mary's experience of the reversal of fortunes is, of course, consistent with Israel's very first experience with Yahweh, who saw the cruelty of Israel's Egyptian oppressors, heard Israel's pleas for deliverance, came down to humble the arrogant Egyptian taskmasters, set Israel

free, and called the nation as an ambassador to bear witness of his character to the nations of the earth.

“And the Lord said, I have surely seen the affliction of my people which are in Egypt, and have heard their cry by reason of their taskmasters; for I know their sorrows; and I am come down to deliver them out of the hand of the Egyptians, and to bring them up out of that land unto a good land and a large, unto a land flowing with milk and honey...”²

Jesus’ intentions are also consistent with the Psalmist’s testimony concerning Yahweh’s interest in and assistance of the lowly and oppressed,³ a core part of his eternal nature.

“The LORD is high above all nations,
and his glory above the heavens.
Who is like unto the LORD our God,
who dwelleth on high,
Who humbleth himself
to behold the things that are in heaven, and in the earth!
*He raiseth up the poor out of the dust,
and lifteth the needy out of the dunghill;
That he may set him with princes,
even with the princes of his people.”*⁴

Based, then, on Israel’s intimate experience with Yahweh, scripture’s testimony of Yahweh’s unchanging character, and her own experience, Mary entertained no doubts about her son’s ultimate success. Hence, she could speak as if he had already accomplished his mission of reversal. We note the past tense of her verbs.

² Exodus 3.⁷⁻⁸

³ This testimony of God stands in stark contrast with that American evangelical “Christianity,” whose God exists only to justify and maintain a privileged white power structure—a power structure that looks for all the world too much like the ancient dynastic Egypt.

⁴ Psalm 113.⁴⁻⁸

He *hath* put down the mighty from their seats,
and [*hath*] exalted them of low degree.
He *hath* filled the hungry with good things;
and the rich he *hath* sent empty away.”

“The mighty” are not thrown down from their power merely as punishment for the crimes that brought them to such power or the manner in which they exercised their power. The “rich” are not “sent empty away” merely as punishment for having purchased their wealth through the exploitation of the poor. Such reversals would set the universe right-side-up. They would also serve as warning to all. “What you earthlings call power is not real power. What you falsely call power can be gone in the blink of an eye. What you deem as wealth is transitory and undependable. What is real is the evil means by which you gained your false power and wealth. That reality, that evil will follow you far after your power and wealth have vanished into nothingness.”

By the time Jesus has finished his life’s work of reversal, he will have turned the world upside down, topsy-turvy, and inside out. Those who might justifiably be thought of as heroes and role models will never look the same. In his kingdom, those who were thought first in the eyes of this world’s kingdoms will be last. In his kingdom, those who were thought last in the eyes of this world’s kingdoms will be first.

This may not be such good news for the high and mighty. But for the likes of Mary, this is glad tidings of great joy, indeed. Little wonder that she exalted,

“My soul doth magnify the Lord,
And my spirit hath rejoiced in God my Saviour.”

Conclusion and benediction

Through Mary’s Magnificat, then, Luke has introduced one of his themes and one of Jesus’ principle objectives. Consistent with the divine and eternal character, Jesus intends to reveal

the world's twisted value system that devalues individuals and justifies the injustices that the powerful, influential, and wealthy perpetrate against those that the world wickedly devalues. But he will do more than reveal those twisted values. He will serve those who have been devalued, thereby showing their true eternal worth, and challenging and reversing the world's perverted values. In revealing the worth of the lowly, he will raise them up. In revealing the false pride of the exalted, he will bring them low. Finally, he will let it be known that he expects those who would be his disciples to pick up and carry on his work of revelation and reversal.

Today is as good a time as any to check all our high mindedness at the door lest we be put down and sent away empty. Today is as good a time as any to humble ourselves, deem ourselves the least of all, knowing that God has far more filling and exalting joy in store for us than the meager and transitory pleasures this world offers.

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!