

CHRISTMAS EVE - The Great Reversal

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Date: 24 December 1997

Preacher: Paul Barker

[0 : 00] This is the 1997 Christmas Eve service. The preacher is Dr. Paul Barker.

His sermon is entitled The Great Reversal and is from Luke chapter 1 verses 39 to 56. In our society pride is a virtue.

We are encouraged to be proud people. We are encouraged to be proud about who we are. So we have gay pride and black pride and every other minority group type pride.

We're encouraged to have healthy, vibrant self-esteem, to be proud about ourselves, who we are and what we do. We're encouraged to be self-assertive type of people, to claim our own rights, to be proud to speak up for ourselves and for what we think is ours and what we deserve.

We're encouraged to be self-sufficient people, proud about our own ability to look after ourselves. We're encouraged to be independent people, proud that we don't need others or need to rely upon other people.

[1 : 19] We're encouraged to be self-made type people, people who work hard and achieve and gain and attain. If we refuse charity or refuse help, then it's sometimes said that we're keeping our pride.

When we in old age need help from others, then it's called a loss of pride or a loss of dignity. I think without doubt we can say that our society values pride as a virtue.

Mary, Jesus' mother, didn't. She had a very different perception of pride. Hers, of course, was a unique honour to be the mother of Jesus Christ.

And when she sang a song to her cousin Elizabeth, as we heard in the reading from Luke's Gospel, she perhaps had every reason to be proud about her unique honour. But her song is not a boast in any way.

She rejoices in God, but she doesn't boast in pride. My soul magnifies the Lord, not herself.

[2 : 38] My spirit rejoices in God, not herself. Indeed, her spirit rejoices in God, her saviour for Mary. Even the mother of Jesus knew that she needed saving.

And God was her saviour. For God, she said, has looked with favour on the lowliness of his servant. Speaking, of course, about herself.

She didn't consider that she deserved to be Jesus' mother, or that she deserved or merited that honour, but rather regarded herself as lowly, and yet had found the favour of God.

Surely, she said, from now on all generations will call me blessed, not because of what she has done, or anything in which she could boast, but rather because of God.

For the mighty one, she said, has done great things for me, and holy is his name. This is a song which had every opportunity for pride, even boasting.

[3 : 41] But rather, it's a song of humility, and praise of a great God. Mary's humility is not a lack of self-esteem.

It isn't that she thought so badly of herself, that she couldn't say anything nice about herself. But rather, hers was a realistic assessment of herself in the light of God.

When she compared herself to the almighty power, and the grace, and the mercy of God, she could not help, but be humble before him.

She knew in the comparison with his greatness, that she was unworthy of such an honour. But Mary's song is not just about her giving birth.

For Mary recognised that her own honour, in receiving favour from God, unworthy though she was, is part of God's ongoing plan, and values for this world.

[4 : 46] She recognised that she was just one example, of God honouring humble people. And so she went on to say, what God was on about in this world.

Speaking in the past tense, and in part referring to what God had been doing, in the past centuries, leading up to her own life. But also pointing, to what that baby inside her, was going to do as well.

So she went on in her song, to say, God has shown strength with his arm. He has scattered the proud, in the thoughts of their hearts. He has brought down the powerful, from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly.

He has filled the hungry, with good things, and sent the rich away empty. Mary recognised God's values, with respect to pride, and humility.

And she recognised that God was bringing about, a reversal, of the world's values. The world then, has now valued pride.

[5 : 56] But what was God going to do? He was going to scatter the proud, in the conceit of their hearts. The proud, who thought proud thoughts. Who thought of themselves, as worthy of God's attention, or honour.

Who thought of themselves, as secure, self-sufficient, independent. God was going to scatter them, bring his judgement upon them, make them vulnerable, in the facade, of their own security.

For the powerful, sitting upon their thrones, probably not just talking, about kings, but people of any power, and influence, in the society, in which Mary lived.

What would God do for them? Bring them greater power, and honour? Far from it. Rather, God would bring down, the powerful from their thrones.

Reversing the standards, of this world, totally. And for the rich, those who have all they need, those who've got plenty, on the table, for Christmas dinner, I suspect in that category, we would all be rich.

[7 : 03] What would God do for the rich? Praise them, for working so hard, that they could look after themselves, and feed themselves, and their families? Far from it. The rich, he sends away empty.

This is God, reversing the values, of the world. The ancient world, but also our world, as well. Remember that Mary's words here, is like a first Christmas carol.

In that sense, they're astonishing words. It doesn't quite sound right, to sing a song of praise, about God sending rich people, away empty, or tearing down the rulers, from their thrones, or scattering the proud.

And yet, it's an appropriate song, for Mary to sing, in the lead up, to Christmas day. For us, for our world, so often, Christmas is a feel good season.

After all, a little baby, in a manger, seems so innocuous, it can hardly help, but make us feel good. Too often, Christmas passes us by, and we just continue on, confirmed in the comfort, of our own life.

[8 : 16] But Mary recognized, what Christmas is really about. It is God, overturning the values, of this world. It is God, turning this world, and its values, topsy-turvy.

I wonder how that fits, with your view, of what Christmas is about. I wonder how that fits, with your view, of why Jesus came, and was born, in the first place.

If anyone had a reason, for pride, Jesus himself did. Born in a grand palace, no far from it, a manger, smelly, dirty, presumably. But Jesus' own humble birth, shows exactly God's values again.

Honoring, and lifting up, the lowly, and despised, of this world. And mocking, and bringing down, the powerful, the rich, and the proud. But Mary's words, are pointing to the climax, of the Jesus story.

For the climax, is not Christmas morning. It isn't the angels, appearing to the shepherds, or even the wise men, coming and paying homage. The climax, of Christmas, and the Jesus story, lies yet 30 years, down the track.

[9 : 23] Or in our calendars, another three, or four months away, on a cross, on Good Friday. where it seems, to all intents and purposes, the life of Jesus, has come to a crashing, and ignominious defeat.

But there, on that cross, demonstrated, by the resurrection, three days later, God's reversal of values, is seen, in its clearest expression. The pride of the world, is scattered, judged, and condemned, by Jesus' death, on the cross, and resurrection, from the dead.

And in that death, and resurrection, God lifts up the lowly, the humble, the poor, the despised, of this world, and lifts them up, to be with him, through his son, Jesus Christ.

The hungry, he fills, with good things, through that same death, and resurrection. For it's when we place, our faith and trust, in Jesus' death, which looks to all intents, and purposes, a defeat, we want to shy away from.

We actually find, that God lifts us up, makes us his children, promises us, an inheritance, with him in heaven. Humble, meek, lowly, despised, though we may be.

[10 : 41] And Christians find, that having placed, their faith and trust, in that death, and resurrection, their eternal needs, are satisfied, by that death. I ought to say, there's nothing wrong, with power per se, or wealth per se, but usually the proud, and the rich, are self-sufficient, independent, not wanting to rely, upon anyone, or anyone else, or any other person, and most of all, seeing no need, for God in their life.

Jesus' birth, is for those, who recognize, reality, rather than a fiction. Jesus' birth, is for those, who humbly recognize, their own inability, to save themselves.

For none of us can. None of us can achieve heaven, by our own work. Only God, can do that for us. Christmas, and Jesus' birth, is for those, who humbly acknowledge, that nothing they do, or say, is worthy of boasting, before God himself.

Jesus' birth, and Christmas, is for those, who humbly confess, an eternal need, for salvation, and forgiveness, from God.

You see, Jesus challenges us, at our pride, at our self-sufficiency, at our independence, from other people, and from God himself. And he turns our values, and the world's values, upside down.

[12 : 18] Pride may be a virtue, in our society, but it has no place, in approaching God. Rather, the opposite is the case. Humility, which our world despises, and looks down on, and thinks is a sign, of great weakness, is indeed a sign, of spiritual strength.

For it is only, with humility, that we can approach, an almighty God, recognising our need, for him. But without it, if we try to approach, God with pride, then Christmas is nothing, and Jesus' birth, is nothing, and his death, and resurrection, are meaningless for us.

For there is no benefit, from those events, unless we turn to God, with genuine, and sincere humility. May God scatter our pride.

May he give us grace, to be humble. And may your Christmas, be a topsy-turvy one, this year. Amen. .

– . Thank you.