

A King Who turns the World Upside-Down

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[0 : 00] Father, we pray that we would rejoice with Mary at the good news of your son's coming into the world. Fill our hearts with song, we pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

Well, up and down the country on Christmas Day, around the dinner table, in almost every house, I think, people are going to put something on their heads.

What do we put on our heads on Christmas lunchtime? You can shout out, young or old? A crown. A crown, yes. A crown. Now, why a crown? In our family growing up, we liked to see who could kind of keep it on their head the longest.

It's a bit silly, it's a bit fun, isn't it? But do you know why crowns are inside crackers? Why do we put a crown on, on Christmas Day? Well, it comes from a very ancient tradition that on Christmas Day, we turn things upside down. On Christmas Day, it was the poor who were the kings and queens. Servants and farmhands would wear paper crowns around the dinner table at Christmas. The landowners, the lords and ladies might pay for them to have a big feast of rich food and drink that they wouldn't otherwise be able to afford.

[1 : 33] Sometimes they would even serve them at the table. Christmas was a day when kings became servants and servants became kings.

Where the mighty were brought down from their thrones and the humble were exalted. And that's a bit of Christmas trivia that you can tell someone on Christmas Day when you've run out of stuff to talk about and you're wearing a silly paper crown on your head.

But actually, that theme of reversal of the high being humbled and the low being lifted goes even further back than Victorian country houses or great medieval halls.

It goes all the way back to the very first Christmas, which Luke records for us here in the Bible, which we just read together. The story is possibly so familiar to us that we miss the fact that everything in the story is the wrong way up.

Of course we say God sent an angel from heaven to a dump in a backwater province, Nazareth of Galilee. That's how the story goes. But why would God send an angel from heaven to a dump in a backwater province?

[2 : 48] Well, we say because that's where Mary lived. But why would God choose an unmarried young woman for a task that involves conceiving a baby?

Nothing in the story makes sense. Everything is back to front. But my job this morning is to convince you that that is exactly the point.

We love singing at Christmastime, don't we? Maybe that's why you're here this morning. And that, too, goes right back to the beginning. Luke's gospel begins with four songs.

You can actually see them set out as songs on the page if you've got your Bible open. And Mary gets the opener. And how does her song begin? Verse 46, 47, 48.

She sings, Mary is singing.

[3 : 51] And what is she singing about? The Lord serving the servant. The high blessing the humble. That's the theme of Mary's song.

And it is a beautiful part of the Christmas message. We ache inside for our lives to mean something to someone. We have a longing to be truly known.

We see more of each other's lives than ever through our phone screens. But I think we're maybe feeling less seen by others than ever before.

We're upset by the thought, aren't we, of people being on their own, especially at Christmastime.

Perhaps you're here today feeling you just aren't that important in the grand scheme of things.

Overlooked, neglected, forgotten, left behind. Maybe in the busyness of the season, you're feeling like you're looking after everyone else. And nobody's looking after you.

[4 : 53] Or maybe you are looking at a lonely Christmas day this year. I'm wondering, who would ever see my life as part of something bigger? Christmas says that there is an eternal king who has come down from his throne in heaven for people like that.

To hold up the humble. To lift up the low. And the very way he came tells us that that's what he came to do. And so this morning, just briefly, I want to target three kind of loose threads in this story.

And just pull them out, draw them out of our passage for us. And show us why that matters. Beginning with these two unlikely new mums.

I reckon we're all pretty familiar with Mary's story. We know how it goes. The angel says, you're going to have a baby. But how will this be since I am a virgin?

But she's not the only one, actually, in this chapter who's surprised one day to find herself pregnant. Just before the angel visits Mary, we find out about another woman at the other end of her life.

[6 : 08] Who's told she's going to have a baby. Elizabeth. Different problem. But the same question. You're going to have a baby? And her husband asks, but how?

How will I know this? For I am an old man, and my wife is advanced in years. A woman too young. A woman too old.

Both told they're going to have babies. Both ask, but how? Sometimes I think we assume that people in the past were a bit simple. But these women are not idiots, are they?

They know very well that virgins and pensioners do not get pregnant. But if you're here and you've kind of made up your mind already that this is all just a fairy tale, it's all a bit made up, and we kind of put up with it at Christmas time, but these pregnancies are simply not possible, then can I gently point out that you've already priced in a pretty significant assumption, which is that the God who's being described in these pages doesn't exist.

Which is a pretty big assumption, isn't it? If you're even mildly interested in what the Bible has to say, because the Bible assumes that God does exist.

[7 : 28] But he created everything. He sustains it all, and it's all under his control. If the God of the Bible is real, then causing a virgin or an elderly couple to conceive is no problem for him.

That's more or less the angel's answer to Mary. How will I have a baby? Well, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son. But nothing will be impossible with God.

So the question behind the question, is this possible, is, does this God exist? And if you're not yet convinced, let me suggest that you start further back with that bigger question.

Is there a God? Is he the God of the Bible? We'd love to explore that with you. Come and speak to one of us after the service. We'd love to chat that through you.

But even if we accept that God can do that, why would he choose to? Some of us will remember the bristlings and mutterings when His Royal Highness Prince William, then third in line to the throne, got down on one knee for plain old Kate.

[8 : 42] How can this commoner be our queen? Well, this is far more scandalous than that, isn't it? God chose an unmarried peasant girl from the back of beyond to be the mother of His son.

And He chose a childless woman way past the menopause to be the mother of the one who would prepare His way. Why would He do that? Well, because the way God sent His Son into the world tells us everything about what His Son was coming into the world to do.

What does Elizabeth say in verse 25? She says, So the Lord has done for me in the days when He looked on me to take away my reproach among people.

The couples to find out that they can't have children is one of the saddest pieces of news we can ever get. Back then, to add to that, for women, came a deep sense of shame, embarrassment.

But what Elizabeth is saying is that God has lifted her shame and turned it to honor. He's taken from her what would lessen her in the eyes of others and given her something that would raise her.

[10 : 01] Ironically, Mary's pregnancy should have done the opposite. She was waiting to be married, but finds she has a bump before the wedding day. Indeed, her fiancé Joseph decides to call it all off before he learns the truth.

But Mary sings for joy that God has seen her in her smallness, looked on her humble estate, and shone heaven's spotlight on her. As she puts it, God has taken an otherwise completely anonymous nobody and made her undoubtedly the most famous woman in history.

From now on, all generations will call me blessed. These women are astounded that God has not forgotten them.

They're shouting, they're singing at the top of their lungs because he sees them and knows them. He's woven them into his plan for history.

He's worked in their lives to raise them up and honor them. He's turning their lives upside down. And like turning over a snow globe, suddenly their world is full of beauty and light.

[11:16] Everything about this first Christmas is upside down, isn't it? Just think about it. How often are two women found turning the wheels of history?

But here they are, Mary and Elizabeth, center stage, giving starring roles in the greatest story ever told. Why did God choose them? Because he is all about putting the humble up high. His kingdom is all about lifting up the low. His king is all about serving the servants. When is the last time the world looked like that?

But that is how God has always worked in the lives of those he loves, under the skin of history, is the beating pulse of God's redeeming love for those who look up to him for his mercy and his help. If you today are feeling like nobody, not noticed, on the edge, too young, too old, too poor, too full of shame, let me say, God has given you something to sing about this morning.

[12:37] Look to the God who sees you and knows you and loves to take away shame and lift up the little and the low. Put your story back into his big story this Christmas.

Put your small hands into his almighty hands and your heart will learn to sing again. That's the first thread for us to pull.

Let's have a tug at a second thread. And let's take a closer look at him then. Our second point, a high God and a holy king. That's what the angel calls God when he announces Jesus' birth in verse 32.

He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. How? Verse 35. The Holy Spirit will come upon you and the Most High will overshadow you.

Therefore, the one to be born will be called Holy, the Son of God. Now, why didn't the angel speak of God as Mary does later on, as God the Savior, the faithful one, the holy one, the mighty one?

[13:48] What about his mercy, his strength, his faithfulness? Why choose to describe God by how high he is? Well, when you think about it, all that God has done for Mary is quite so amazing because he is so high.

There are people, aren't there, who work day and night in care homes, in orphanages, in prisons, caring for those deemed least, forgotten in our society.

But what if King Charles turned up at the care home one day, got changed into scrubs and started washing bedpans, changing the clothes of the residents, giving them a wash?

What if he stayed for a week and took shifts? What if he took some of them home with him to Highgrove and nursed them himself? It would be an incredible thing to see, wouldn't it?

We'd hardly believe it. It would easily be the most read news story of the year, most watched video for 2025. Friends, what if the Most High God came down to overshadow a young, unmarried, peasant woman in the back of beyond?

[15:03] What if the Son of the Most High was made flesh in her womb? What if he came down to earth from heaven who is God and Lord of all?

And his shelter was a stable and his cradle was a stall. What if, with the poor and mean and lowly, lived on earth our Savior holy?

It's because of how high and holy he is that we should be amazed at how low he stooped to lift us up. It's not just the depth he reached but the distance he had to come to do it.

And the way that he came from the very highest to the very lowest says everything about what kind of king he grew up to be and still is now.

Christmas reminds us every year that this king of glory being made little for us wasn't a glitch but a feature of his reign. that he didn't just look down on but entered fully into the smallness and shame and obscurity and forgottenness of Mary's world.

[16:14] He became her son. And by doing that he shows us that he came for the humble, the small, the forgotten. Mary praises God that he who is mighty has done great things for her.

that his mercy is not for a select few important people but for all those who fear him. He's worked in these women's lives to raise them up.

He's entered into their world. He's used his strength to scatter the proud, to bring down the mighty and instead to lift up the humble and fill the hungry with good things.

And she knows all that about him because he, her Lord, has come down to be a baby in her arms. That is why as Christians we praise Jesus at Christmas time because he came down so far to save us.

I think that's why Christmas carols still have such a grip on people's hearts even today, why people will come later on to our carol service because even those who don't believe know the beauty of the most high becoming most low.

[17 : 34] Friends, if you're new to the Bible this morning, this is the God who the Bible claims is real, not like the gods that we imagine or make up, a God way up there who doesn't care, but a God who, though he is most high, has come down most low to live among us, become one of us so that he could raise us from the depths.

Strangely, most of us imagine a God who we have to work hard for to make him pleased with us. That is the basis of every human religion, that if we do what God wants, then he'll love us. But the real God came down not to be served by us, but to serve us. Not so that we could lift him up, but so that he could lift us up.

That's what makes him in Mary's words, God our Savior, Jesus Christ our Lord. So that's who he is. One final tug, then, at the loose thread this morning.

What do we do with all this? Our final point, then, the humble and the proud. Mary sings about God bringing down the proud but lifting up the humble, so who are they?

[18 : 49] Well, the only clues that we really get here are in verse 50, 45, and 25. Just have a look at verse 50. Mary says, his mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation.

Now, we hear that word fear, we think phobias, we think kind of anxiety, worry, but that's not what that word means here. What it means is what Mary and Elizabeth have shown us in verse 25 and 45.

Elizabeth conceives and says, thus the Lord has done for me in the days when he looked on me. And she recognizes it's God who's at work.

She trusts him with what he's doing. She gives him credit for it. And she says about Mary, verse 45, blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her from the Lord.

Mary recognizes it is God at work. She's trusted him to do what he's promised. She goes on to give him the praise for it. Mary and Elizabeth show us what it means to fear the Lord, to hold him in awe, to adore him, to bow to him, to trust him, and to thank him.

[20 : 09] In short, it is to put our faith in him and out of that faith flows worship, praise. Mary says that the Lord's mercy has put people like that in every generation, those who, rather than looking down on God in pride, look up to him for his help and his rescue.

Just because you are poor or hungry doesn't necessarily make you humble. You can have very little, but be very angry at God and stand over him.

that just because you have money or importance doesn't make you proud. You can have very much, but be one of his children by faith. The point is that to look up to God, you have to bring yourself low.

To be raised up by God, you have to bring yourself under him. And the big way that we need to do that is by believing the good news that the angel brought to Mary, that Jesus is the son of God and the promised king to rule over God's people and the world forever.

Now that's a very big claim and if you need to know more before you feel like you can make a call on that, well that's what the rest of Luke's gospel is written to do.

[21 : 32] Let me encourage you in the run up to Christmas to read through this gospel or join us in the new year to walk through Mark's gospel in our Christianity Explored course with others asking those questions.

You can come back tonight for the next song in the series or join us next Sunday or if somebody has brought you along this morning ask them why they believe Jesus is who he said he was, the son of God and the king from God, the Messiah.

But like Mary it is by believing that there would be a fulfillment of what was promised to her from the Lord that we will be saved. Putting our trust in the child who was born to her as our true king from God, coming under his rule in our lives is the only way we will know his mercy, his help, his rescue. If we dismiss him or ignore his claim to be king, sit ourselves over the angel's message, then, says Mary, we will be cast low, scattered.

But if we humbly receive him, believe the good news of his coming as our king into this world, rest our hope in him, then he will fill us, raise us, and save us into his everlasting kingdom.

[22 : 57] And when he does, the only response of our hearts can be to sing for joy. that's what we do here every Sunday when we come, that's what we're doing today. If you're keen on carols, come back tonight and we'll sing some more, but either way, if you think that there might be something here that could make your heart sing, let me encourage you not to let today be the last day that you do that.

The wonderful message of Christmas is a gift that keeps on giving every day of every year, that God's son, our true king, Jesus Christ, has come down from heaven to earth to save us.

So let me encourage you, if you're visiting today, to come back to hear more. Let me encourage you to believe in the good news of Christmas. And let me encourage you to keep singing to God most high who stooped down most low in the person of his son, Jesus, to lift us up and to rescue us.

We're going to respond together as we sing wonderful words, a wonderful hymn, a little town of Bethlehem, a hymn that reminds us, a carol that reminds us of the greatness of the God who came down so low to be our savior.

Let's stand together as we... ..