

“He has filled the hungry with good things, and the rich He has sent away empty.” Luke 1:53
4th Sunday in Advent, 2009 Roy A. Harrisville III

If buttercups buzz'd after the bee,
If boats were on land, churches on sea,
If ponies rode men and if grass ate the cows,
And cats should be chased into holes by the mouse,
If the mamas sold their babies
To the gypsies for half a crown;
If summer were spring and the other way round,
Then all the world would be upside down

These words have a connection to Christmas and the American Revolution.

The poem is from an old song that first appeared in the British Isles in the 17th century. England had been torn apart by civil war and a man by the name of Oliver Cromwell had been victorious. He was an austere Protestant man who ruled England not as King but as Lord Protector and issued many harsh laws on his former enemies. He was not well-liked and after he died the English got their king back. Someone wrote this song when Cromwell was still alive. Whoever wrote it did so because of those harsh laws that Cromwell had enacted, especially about celebrating Christmas. He ordered that Christmas should be a solemn time of reflection and not celebration. His soldiers were therefore ordered to go about the towns and take any special Christmas food that was being cooked for celebration. The smell of a Christmas goose cooking in the oven was an invitation to trouble. Cromwell even banned the practice of decorating houses with holly. I'm afraid Oliver Cromwell would probably be upset with most of us. So somebody wrote this little song (“If ponies rode men and if grass ate the cows”) to mock the draconian laws of Cromwell and express the sentiment that everything was being turned upside down.

In 1781 the American Revolution came to an end at the siege of Yorktown when the British surrendered to General Washington. The British marched out of the city and stacked their arms in a meadow beyond the battlefield. The British played their drums, and maybe a fife or two, while their men marched out and back to the city. But a legend grew up later on that the

British played this little song about the world being turned upside down. It's a good legend, as legends go, but there is no evidence to back it up. We don't know what songs anyone played on the day the war ended and the colonies achieved their independence.

From that day until now the United States has held the promise of turning the world upside down. We have tried to export our system of government to other lands because we have believed it to be the most equitable and just. In some respects we have been successful and in others we have not. We helped restore peace and democracy to Europe twice. But we have not been able to export our vision to all lands and even among our own people. Tyranny still exists in various countries around the globe and poverty and want and injustice continue to mar this great country of ours. Perhaps some have achieved great prosperity and freedom, but others have not. There is work yet to be done.

“He has filled the hungry with good things and the rich He has sent the rich away empty.” When these words were spoken they were spoken, according to Luke, by a young woman who had lived less than 20 years on the planet. She had grown up in a country in which poverty and great wealth existed side by side. She was not among the rich. She lived in a land ruled by a foreign power that had not one shred of respect for democracy. To be sure, the Roman Empire continued to describe itself as a Republic, but in name only. It was a tyrannical government that enslaved millions and would do so for centuries after Luke wrote his Gospel. How then can we understand these words of Mary and take them seriously? In an Advent season in which our economy continues to trouble us, people have lost jobs, church finances are in doubt, and no one has a real handle on the future; how can we take these words and apply them to our lives with any sense of assurance or certainty?

There are many people who still object to celebrating Christmas because they think the Christian Church and Christians are just a bunch of useless nonsense, or worse. An Australian columnist wrote a little column this past week in the Sydney Morning Herald in which he praised

Christmas and the birth of Christ as a good thing because Jesus taught that all people matter. Never mind that he had questions about Jesus' divinity, he still thought that all in all, Jesus has had a positive effect on humanity down through the ages. Well! You know how you can respond now to columnists online? Many newspapers and news outlets do this now – they have a little box on the bottom of the web page in which people can write comments, questions and remarks. Every single one of the comments to this article was negative. Some people complained that the columnist didn't mention all the other religions that had a positive effect on the world and that the columnist was being exclusive and anti-multicultural. Others complained that Jesus had started a movement that led to the persecution of folks like Galileo and witches and others. They mentioned the wars that Christians had fought in the name of religion and some of the comments condemned religion in general as being out of date and the cause of much suffering in the world.

It was just a Christmas column and it wasn't that long. It was just an expression of appreciation for one historical figure who is still important to billions of people around the globe. But these days the Christian faith is taking it on the chin, partly because of what we read in Luke and how people misunderstand it, misapply it, and abuse it. But also because of the way Christians behave.

“He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly...” Has He? Oppressive regimes still exist in our world even if they are not ruled over by kings and queens or emperors. Herod the Great ruled Judea when these words were spoken and he did not die until years later. He was a cruel and brutal man, but he died on his throne. We have witnessed any number of tyrant who died in office: Joseph Stalin and Francisco Franco to name two from the last century. Kim Jong Il still holds power in North Korea and rules as a god-like figure. Sure, some mighty monarchs have lost their crowns, but just as many have not. How have the might been thrown down and how have the lowly been elevated? Millions still live in poverty and the shadow of starvation. Our sister Church in Malawi Africa exists in one of the poorest

nations on earth. They have to establish feeding stations, feeding stations, to do what they can to fill the stomachs of their people.

And yet, these words of Luke are in the past tense, as though the events they relate had already happened. These words about scattering the proud in the imagination of their hearts are all in the past tense, as though it were a thing accomplished, as though it were already done. These words are uttered in such certainty and assurance and hope that they are expressed in the past tense like so many prophetic words before them. Isaiah foretold the restoration of Israel before it happened with these words: “Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that she **has served** her term, that her penalty **is paid**, that she **has received** from the Lord’s hand double for all her sins.” It is as if the destruction of Jerusalem, the exile, the return, and the restoration had already taken place long before they happened. Isaiah and the prophets will speak of future events as though they had already happened because their faith was so strong in the Lord that He would in fact do what had been foretold. Such is the faith that is expressed in Luke’s Gospel on the lips of Mary, the mother of Jesus. That is the faith of one who never objected to what was happening to her, even though she should have been terrified out of her mind. It is the faith of a young woman who acquiesced instantly and embraced the prophecy whole-heartedly that from her womb would come the Savior of the nations. The words that we have in Luke’s Gospel are prophetic words that came from a firm and unwavering faith, solid in the belief that God was about to do something that would turn the world upside down, inside out, and sideways. It is the faith that those who are proud have already been dealt a humiliating blow. It is the faith that those who have had nothing already have more than they can dream of. It is the faith that reaches beyond sight, beyond today, into the certainty of tomorrow.

But still, there are doubts and criticisms. Still there exist the scoffers and nay-sayers who insist that Christ is a myth and his followers are deluded. Still there are those who insist that far

from accomplishing what Mary said, the Church has been complicate in the very opposite. They must understand two things. First, that Jesus' followers have never been expected to be perfect and fulfill God's eternal will in every respect. We are sinful and unclean. We are poor followers of Christ and cannot claim that we follow Christ's teachings precisely. Jesus is not to be blamed when his followers do not understand what he wants and can't do it even they did understand. That's the first thing to understand, that Jesus is not to blame for the sinfulness of his disciples. Second, and this is the most important and the hardest to grasp – it's true. God has sent the rich empty away. What Luke and Mary said was true. The proud have been humbled, the poor have been exalted, the rich are destitute and the hungry are full. It's true. It is not visible with the naked eye. It isn't apprehendable by the finite mind. It may even seem pure fantasy to pragmatists, but it's all true for with the birth of Christ the world is truly turned upside down. What you thought was power is weakness and weakness is power. What you thought was valuable is garbage and rubble is worth a king's ransom. The rich man in fine clothing is but a poor beggar before God. The homeless waif on the street is a queen in the Lord's eyes. Do you think you have power over others and may dictate terms to your opponents? Then glance in the mirror to see the strings on your arms and legs. The world has already been turned upside down by the One who rose from the dead and turned funerals into celebrations and tears into laughter. The executioner's cross has become an instrument of life and heaven has descended to earth. There are still those who are hungry in our world, destitute and lonely, and still those who lives are proud and arrogant. We feed them with real food and do what we can for them but we also feed them with the news that Jesus Christ has exalted the lowly and humbled the exalted. Not just words, but the truth that mice have been chasing the cats into holes for quite some time. Amen.