

# God's Great Reversal: Key to the Gospel of Luke



The Gospel of Luke, which we will hear continuously this year on Sundays in Ordinary Time and Lent, assures us that the Kingdom of God, in its fullness, will confound all our expectations and will overturn our experiences. In fact, in the Kingdom of God everything will be turned upside down.

This is especially true when it comes to power, privilege and wealth. Luke assures us time and again that in God's Kingdom those who struggle in life now—those who are at the bottom or on the edges of human society—will suddenly find themselves at the top and in the center.

On the other hand, he warns those who now enjoy the greatest human security and social advantage that their experience may be very different. As Jesus tells his listeners on one occasion, "Behold, some are last who will be first, and some are first who will be last" (Luke 13:30, New American Bible, also used for other quotes). This notion that in the end God will turn everything we know upside down

is often called the “Great Reversal.” It is a hallmark of Luke’s Gospel, where it appears frequently.

### **Mary’s Magnificat**

The announcement of the Great Reversal appears early in the Gospel in the Magnificat (1:46-55), Mary’s great song of praise. Shortly after she consents to become the mother of Jesus, the young girl from the little town of Nazareth hurries to visit her cousin Elizabeth who, she has learned from the Angel Gabriel, has conceived a child in her old age. When the two meet, Elizabeth bursts into a joyous welcome for “the mother of my Lord”(1:43).

Mary responds by offering praise to God for what he has done for her:

*“My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord,  
my spirit rejoices in God my savior.  
For he has looked upon his handmaid’s lowliness.” (1:46b-48a)*

Mary represents the most powerless and insignificant people in her society: young, female, poor. Yet God has chosen her—of all people—to be the mother of the long-awaited Messiah. Mary’s lowliness, which in human eyes would surely disqualify her from even being considered for such an unimaginably important role in God’s plan of salvation, is exactly what makes her so perfect for it.

Mary is “lowly” not simply in social status, but also in her relationship to God. Her social vulnerability allows her to be spiritually vulnerable as well. She is humble, open to the call of God, however frightening it may be, however impossible it may seem. Because she knows she is so dependent on God’s mercy, she is radically free and open to put herself at the disposal of God’s glory.

Although she sings that “the Mighty One has done great things for me”(1:49), Mary also understands that what God has done for her as an individual is a sign of God’s concern for all the lowly:

*“He has shown might with his arm,  
dispersed the arrogant of mind and heart.  
He has thrown down the rulers from their thrones  
but lifted up the lowly.  
The hungry he has filled with good things;  
the rich he has sent away empty.” (1:51-53)*

God’s action on Mary’s behalf signals an overturning of society as a whole. Not only are the lowly lifted up and the hungry fed well, but the rich and the powerful have actually lost their positions in society. What God intends is not just that those who are without will have, but that those who have will be without.

This is a declaration of God's judgment on the arrogant and the proud, the exact opposite of the lowly and humble. Such people are not open to hearing the call of God and, as will become quite evident in the rest of the Gospel, are particularly resistant to hearing Jesus proclaim the Kingdom of God.

Their sense of security and well-being prevents them from seeing how dependent they are on God's mercy. Thus, their social invulnerability has created in them a similar spiritual invulnerability.

The proud and arrogant effectively shut themselves out of the Kingdom, resisting the call to conversion and the acceptance of God's mercy, the two keys to that Kingdom.

What are we to make of the fact that Mary declares that these things have already happened? Anyone could see 2,000 years ago that the rich and powerful were still quite rich and quite powerful, and that the lowly and hungry were no better off than before.

According to some scholars, the original Greek uses the past tense here to indicate habitual action, so that Mary is describing a God who routinely upsets the rich and powerful while raising up the lowly.

Other scholars argue that the past tense here means what it often does when used by biblical prophets, to indicate a future event that has been firmly declared by God. In that sense, it is as good as done.

While one does not have to choose either of these options, the Magnificat clearly refers to an eschatological reversal, that is, to one that will occur in the coming age. We recognize this as already inaugurated by God's making Mary the mother of the Messiah.

### **Blessings and Woes**

God's Great Reversal will become a significant, and disturbing, feature of the teaching of Jesus. In his Sermon on the Plain (6:20-49), Jesus proclaims these four blessings (or beatitudes):

*“Blessed are you who are poor, for the Kingdom of God is yours.*

*Blessed are you who are now hungry, for you will be satisfied.*

*Blessed are you who are now weeping, for you will laugh.*

*Blessed are you when people hate you,*

*and when they exclude and insult you*

*and denounce your name as evil*

*on account of the Son of Man.*

*Rejoice and leap for joy on that day!  
Behold, your reward will be great in heaven.” (6:20b-23a)*

Poor, hungry, mourning and hated people receive from Jesus a great consolation: One day things will be different. The poor and hungry of the world are not blessed because they are poor and hungry—poverty is not held up here as a good thing—but because what they do not have now, they will one day have in the Kingdom of God, which is already theirs!

Even those who experience rejection because of Jesus should consider themselves fortunate, not because being hated is a good thing but because their fidelity to the Son of Man in the face of opposition assures them a place in heaven.

Hatred, poverty, mourning and hunger are social evils that are not acceptable to God, and never have been, as the prophets relentlessly insisted. Blessing lies not in being poor or in being hated, but in the fact that in the world to come, the poor and the hated know that their fortunes will be reversed.

What is a consolation to the lowly in this world is disturbing news for the comfortable, whom Jesus informs what they can expect:

*“But woe to you who are rich,  
for you have received your consolation.  
But woe to you who are filled now,  
for you will be hungry.  
Woe to you who laugh now,  
for you will grieve and weep.  
Woe to you when all speak well of you,  
for their ancestors treated the false prophets in this way.” (6:24-26)*

Each of the earlier blessings has been matched by a corresponding woe. The rich will have no need of consolation in the coming age; they have it now. The well-fed, the carefree and even the socially admired of this world will not experience consolation in the coming age.

Like his mother before him, Jesus makes the disturbing announcement that the fullness of the Kingdom of God might be less than enjoyable for some people.

At this point, we might ask: What is wrong with being wealthy, well-fed or highly thought of? Doesn't God want these things for all of us? It is easy to see why Jesus would assure the poor and hungry that one day their situation will be remedied, but why should the rich and well-fed be punished in the coming age for their current prosperity?

Is there something wrong with being prosperous or with enjoying the good things in life? The answer is no; there is not. But social and economic security can blind us to certain realities and make us deaf to others, making us unable to respond to the ethical and the spiritual demands of the Kingdom of God.

Later in the Gospel, Jesus tells a story demonstrating that social invulnerability can be spiritually dangerous.

### **Lazarus and the Rich Man**

There once was a rich man, Jesus tells his disciples (16:19-31), who used to dress in expensive clothes and dine well every day. At his gate there was a very poor man named Lazarus, who instead of being covered with fine linen was covered with sores. Instead of dining sumptuously every day, Lazarus longed for even the smallest scrap from the rich man's table. After both men die, the rich man finds himself in fiery torment in the netherworld, while Lazarus is comfortably beside Abraham and all the righteous.

On seeing this, the rich man orders Abraham to send Lazarus with water to quench his thirst. Abraham refuses, noting that the rich man had been very comfortable in life.

Then the rich man begs Abraham to send Lazarus to the rich man's brothers to warn them, so that they can avoid his fate. Still refusing, Abraham reminds the man that his brothers have all the warnings they need in the teachings of Moses and the prophets.

Once again, we have the Great Reversal, this time written in the lives of two individuals. Their situations in this life and the next can perhaps be understood to represent those of the poor and the rich in general. We can be quite happy for Lazarus, who surely deserved to receive great comfort with Abraham after such a miserable life.

But what of the rich man? What was his crime that he should deserve such torment? Jesus makes it clear that it was not his wealth that was the problem. He is not condemned simply for being rich and well-fed; he is condemned because his good fortune blinded him to the moral responsibility he had toward Lazarus. The rich man failed to take care of the poor, a religious obligation made abundantly clear in the teachings of Moses and the prophets (see, for example, Deuteronomy 15:7-11, Amos 6:1-14 and Isaiah 58:6-9).

Because the rich man addresses Lazarus by name and obviously knew him in life, he does not even have the excuse that he didn't know there was a poor beggar suffering at his door. To make matters worse, the rich man seems to feel that even

in death Lazarus should serve him, first, by bringing him some water and, then, by being a messenger to his brothers.

Insensitivity to the plight of the poor man is aggravated by arrogance and a sense of entitlement. Despite the insistence of his religious tradition that the well-off must have compassion for the poor, the rich man's comfort and satisfaction with life made him deaf to God's word. And so his fate is sealed and his fortunes reversed.

### **What about Us?**

Such a message must have been particularly compelling, and probably not a little challenging, for the Christians who first received Luke's Gospel. It seems clear that the evangelist himself came from a privileged level of society (his Greek is very sophisticated, indicating a good education), and he most likely was writing for other educated and affluent Christians.

The question of wealth and possessions comes up time and again both in the Gospel and in the Acts of the Apostles, also written by Luke as a companion piece to the Gospel. Acts also emphasizes God's enduring love for every person.

The relationship of material wellbeing to discipleship must have been a particularly critical issue for Luke's audience. The question was: How should Christians who are socially secure relate to their own well-being and to the needs of others?

Contemporary Christians, particularly those of us who live in relatively prosperous societies, are certainly called to ask the same question. To those of us who are able to enjoy material and social prosperity, the Great Reversal may seem like very Bad News indeed. What are we to make of it? What does Jesus want us to know?

One thing that is very clear about the Great Reversal is that it is the work of God, the God who acts to set things right, to bring healing and liberation in this world and in the next. It is not something that humans can accomplish, and so the announcement of the Great Reversal is not a call for humanly orchestrated social upheaval.

At the same time, it is not a call for maintaining the status quo by assuring poor people that their poverty is a blessing. The call of Moses and the prophets—and Jesus and the saints—is not only to care for the disadvantaged but also to work actively to bring about economic justice for all people. This charge remains our religious obligation, just as it was for the rich man.

The Great Reversal assures us that the poor, the vulnerable, the marginalized—all those who count for nothing in this world—count very much in the Kingdom of God. The future holds great promise for them because God cares deeply for them.

For those who find this life easy and satisfying, the Great Reversal serves as a warning. While they are not evil in themselves, wealth and power are spiritually dangerous, always threatening to lull us into complacency and insensitivity to the needs of others.

They can also make us proud, relying on our own resources and failing to recognize our ultimate dependency on God. Only when we recognize this dependency can we, like Mary, open ourselves to hear the call of God. Only when we recognize our dependence on God can we be humble enough to hear Jesus' invitation into the Kingdom of God, where the last in this world will be first and the first in this world—the proud, the arrogant, the satisfied—will be last.

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