

The poetry of reversal – Luke 1:46-55

I apologise for showing you an ad in church, but I went to the movies a few weeks ago and was impressed by the creativity that had gone into this...

*[VIDEO] "You won't remember my name
this is the last time
you will see me at the top,
my doubts
will destroy
my dreams,
the more I seem to learn,
the more I seem to lose,
I want to carry on,
but not today,
this is the point I give up..."*

This kind of poem, that can be read forwards and backwards, and which has a different meaning when it is read in the other direction, is called a *reverso* poem or a *palindrome* poem.



Now I am not casting shade on your literary efforts, Rebecca, this book is an incredible achievement, but the 4th century Chinese poet, Su Hui, famous for her innovations with palindrome poems, wrote an 840-character poem, referred to as 'Star Guage', which can be read forwards, backwards, horizontally, vertically, diagonally and just within its colour-coded grids. During the Ming dynasty (1368-1644) scholars discovered 7,940 different ways to read it. And in case you have been reading (or counting), during the Qing dynasty, the character for heart 心 was added to the centre of the poem, so it now has 841 characters.

But the words we read this morning, the poem of praise attributed to Mary, are also extraordinary. They are not a *reverso* or *palindrome* poem, but they are a poem about the great theme of Luke-Act – God's salvation by reversal!

Mary is living in first century Palestine under Roman occupation. There is some religious tolerance, but there is also huge social and economic inequality. There are heavy Romans taxes, political unrest and violent oppression. And Mary herself is now extremely vulnerable, a young pregnant and unmarried woman.

And yet the poem she speaks out reads her situation in the other direction, bringing new meaning to what is taking place in her life. "God my Saviour," she says, "*has looked in favour on the lowliness of his servant*". A great reversal has taken place. By involving her in God's salvation of the world, "*The Mighty One has done great things for [lowly] me.*"

And in this act of reversal, Mary sees a sign of God's great work of salvation – for all people – from generation to generation. God has showed mercy to the humble. God has lifted up the lowly. God has filled the hungry with good things.

Actually, our modern English translations render these verbs in the perfect tense (implying past action that continues into the present), but in Mary's poem these are aorist verbs (indicating these actions have been completely completed!) God 'looked' with favour, God 'did' great things, God 'showed' strength and 'scattered' the proud, God 'brought down' the powerful and 'lifted up' the lowly, God 'filled' the hungry and 'sent away' the rich empty.

Reading our human situation in the reverse direction, Mary boldly declares that salvation through the work of Jesus yet unborn is a done deal!



One of the things I have loved, listening to Rebecca talk about her research and her thesis, and now her book, is how she, knowing that women are of value to God, has worked so hard to read history in the other direction – including women's names, telling their stories, bringing new meaning and richness and completeness to our shared Baptist life.

Because this is what happens when God – through God's work of salvation in our world - reads our world and our lives in the other direction. Yes, the proud are scattered. Yes, the powerful are brought down. Yes, those who are full are sent away empty. But not so the powerless and powerful simply change places. But so everyone can come to a new place – a place of meaning and richness and completeness in our shared life with God.



In her book, *A Hunger Beyond Food*, Sara Miles writes, *"At the heart of Christianity is a power that continues to speak to and transform us.... What I heard, and continue to hear, is a voice that can crack religious and political convictions open, that advocates for the least qualified, least official, least likely; that upsets the established order and makes a joke of certainty. It proclaims against reason that the hungry will be fed, that those cast down will be raised up, and that all things, including my own failures, are being made new. It offers food without exception to the worthy and unworthy, the screwed-up and pious, and then commands everyone to do the same."*

We join Mary and all God's people throughout history who read the poem backwards, who, *"[proclaim] against reason that the hungry will be fed, that those cast down will be raised up, and that all things...are being made new."*

Let us sing the Magnificat again. I invite the women to stand first and sing it through, then the men to join us and then we will sing it a third time praising God who reads our world backwards and loves it to completeness!

Call to Worship

As we continue to journey in faith,
we remember your great salvation promises.
That you will disempower the proud,
giving strength to powerless people.
That you will bring down tyrants,
lifting up people who are oppressed.
That you will send away those who hoard your goodness,
filling hungry people with good things.
And we remember we belong
to this upside-down Kingdom,
love that loves our world so much
it makes creation whole.

Prayer (inspired by Luke 1:46-55)

Merciful God,
May Mary's song still echo through the ages...
May it be heard by the victims of violence
in Israel and in Gaza.
May it sing in the hearts of those living
in countries most affected by climate change.
May it be the rally cry of peace
for the war-weary of Myanmar, and Sudan and Ukraine and Russia.
May it be a song that stirs reverent fear
in the hearts of those who assume power.
May it be an earworm song of hope
for all who are dealing with difficult work situations or anxiety about health
or concern for others who are unwell or who are grieving today.
And may the joyful promise of your great salvation
fill all our hearts to overflowing action and endless praise. **Amen.**

Benediction (Christine, *Faith in Grey Places*)

This is the Father's will
Revealed to us in Christ:
Mysteries of time
Are coming to fulfilment —
And all the blessings of heaven
Are promised to us in Christ:
Redemption and adoption for honour and glory.

What can we say? We have
The Holy Spirit,
The seal of our inheritance,
And we give praise as we bear
Witness to all. We know
God himself is
Always and forever, and
We have hope
In Christ.

In Christ

We have hope

Always and forever. And

God himself is

Witness to all we know.

And we give praise as we bear

The seal of our inheritance,

The Holy Spirit.

What can we say? We have

Redemption and adoption. For honour and glory

Are promised to us in Christ.

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