The Song of Mary: A reading of the Magnificat

I'm delighted to be here. It's nice to feel, well, *normal* for a while. The Ekklesia Project is--among other things--a lovely collection of misfits: oddballs and trouble-makers and people who ask questions. Here we fit together, here we make sense, because in our many different ways we are struggling to live within the subversive, counter-cultural reign of God. That's harder than it should be, because the religious traditions we inherit have been tamed by empire, accommodated to global capitalism, mumbled into safe clichés. But these traditions have not been entirely extinguished, and all of us bear witness to that in our many different ways.

Once upon a time, far away and long ago, a young woman also bore witness not only to the power of what she inherited but also to the perennial human need to re-read traditions, to remain alert to the fact that God is always up to new things. And so I'd like to take a good close look at the lyrics to Mary's song. I think it would do well as our theme song here at the Ekklesia Project. It's an astounding song. And it's dangerous. (Maybe they are right to call us troublemakers.)

Now I think we are all quite familiar with the tame reading of this text, the conventional, accommodated reading of the Magnifcat. It goes like this: some day the poor will rule the world and the rich will go homeless and hungry. Someday in-group and out-group will trade places, and woe to any who resist. They will be scattered and slaughtered just as the *Left Behind* novels describe, just as the Egyptians and the Canaanites were slaughtered before them. X-rated violence in the Old Testament unequivocally testifies that God has always had a huge violent streak, perhaps even a sadistic side. Someday he will unleash that violence as of old: sinners will find themselves in the hands of this angry God. Someday they will get theirs--and we will get ours. Someday. Just wait.

But y'know, I worry about that reading. I worry about worshipping such a violent, even sadistic God. Furthermore, I worry that this God has been promising this outcome for millennia--without delivering on his promises. Look how the gospels end: the Roman empire still safely ensconced and the storehouses all safely locked. Has this God once again botched his promise to exalt the lowly and the oppressed? Or is "salvation" just some "pie in the sky when you die" scheme?

Furthermore, you can't sing the Magnificat to the tune of "If I Ruled the World." The reign of God is a lot more complicated than trading places with The Powers That Be. If Christians ruled the world, after all--even us! here!--the world would still be a mess. For a long time, Christians did rule at least the European West, and we didn't do particularly well. Even today--consider what all of us know about congregational politics. Consider what some of us know about academic politics inside seminaries and divinity schools. Nope. If We Ruled the World, everyone else would still be singing the litany response, "Good Lord, Deliver Us." There's more to the reign of God than trading places.

So what do we make of Mary's Song? It seems to me that Mary's song is prophetic poetry. Mary claims that the nonviolent, counter-cultural reign of God has already come among us, and within us, in a revolution far more powerful than military violence can supply. Today I want to show you how the poem contrasts the mightiness of God to the mightiness of human political power, and how it demonstrates that freedom from oppression depends less upon "regime change" than

it does upon a change of heart--upon refusing to credit those who call us a bunch of romantic misfits and irresponsible dingbats. Or outrageous women and gutless men. Or . . . what they called you the last time *you* got in trouble.

My reading of this text hinges upon two words, "blessed" (line 4) and "regarded" (line 3), but I want to go through it line by line in classic literary manner. Let me begin by reading it aloud--please just follow along, noticing what you notice.

The Magnificat
(The Song of Mary)

And Mary said, "My soul magnifies the Lord,	1
and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,	2
for he has regarded the low estate of his handmaiden.	3
For behold, henceforth all generations will call me blessed;	4
for he who is mighty has done great things for me,	5
and holy is his name.	6
And his mercy is on those who fear him	7
from generation to generation.	8
He has shown strength with his arm,	9
he has scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts,	10
he has put down the mighty from their thrones,	11
and exalted those of low degree;	12
he has filled the hungry with good things,	13
and the rich he has sent empty away.	14
He has helped his servant Israel,	15
in remembrance of his mercy,	16
as he spoke to our fathers,	17
to Abraham and to his posterity for ever."	18

Luke 1: 46-55, RSV

Notice, first of all, the line numbers on the far right. Those are mine, obviously, as are the line breaks highlighting parallel grammatical structures. A technical literary analysis can be hard to follow otherwise. For the same reason, I've also divided the poem structurally into two stanzas. The first stanza focuses upon the mightiness of God in comparison to the lowliness of his handmaiden. The last full sentence of stanza 1 is a statement about God and Israel. The second stanza contrasts the lowliness of the poor with the mightiness of rich, and its last full sentence is a very similar statement about God and Israel. A strong, rich pattern of contrasts between high and low structures the whole poem.

As I said, both stanzas conclude with statements in very familiar language that the relationship between God and humanity is both ancient and rooted in Jewish history. But notice, if you will, two things about these little conclusions or, if you will, choruses between the verses of the song: first, "mercy" appears in both--line 7 and line 16; second, "posterity" shows up in line 18, and its

near synonym "generation" shows up twice in line 8 and once in line 4. Ok? Everybody with me here?

One more large observation about stanza 1. Look at lines 3, 4, and 5. They all begin with the word "for." That word choice is an artifact of translation, of course, but it signals something deeper nonetheless: there are three richly parallel statements here explaining why Mary is so exuberant. Take a look at these lines:

for he has regarded the low estate of his handmaiden.	3
For behold, henceforth all generations will call me blessed;	4
for he who is mighty has done great things for me,	5
and holy is his name.	6

Notice that none of them refer directly to her new pregnancy, nor to the identity of the child she carries. That may seem fairly odd, if you think about it. But since as readers we already know that her child will be the Messiah, these three lines--this poetic triplet--tell us something important about what sort of salvation this child will bring.

Furthermore, these three parallel constructions are echoed by six parallel constructions in the second stanza. In lines 9-14, six "he has" statements describe God's actions with the rich and the poor. Take a look:

He has shown strength with his arm,	9
he has scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts,	10
he has put down the mighty from their thrones,	11
and exalted those of low degree;	12
he has filled the hungry with good things,	13
and the rich he has sent empty away.	14

(There is a 7th "he has" in line 15--I'll get back to that in a minute.) Mary's three reasons or explanations from the first stanza have here expanded exponentially. That expansive movement from stanza 1 to stanza 2 locating Mary's pregnancy with the expanding circle of God's saving action "from generation to generation" forever: the seventh and concluding "he has" statement in what I'm calling the "chorus" of the song opens out this blessing to all people of all times. These expanding circles are something like a womanly joke about pregnancy itself.

Are you with me here? Now that we have seen some of the large patterns, let's go through it line by line.

"My soul magnifies the Lord," Mary says, "and my spirit rejoices." Right away we know something strange is going on with this lady. "Magnify" can mean simply "praise" or "glorify," of course; and that's perfectly reasonable here. But to magnify also means to enlarge, as in "magnifying glass" or, metaphorically speaking, to make greater in status or importance, as in

"magnificent." But a human being cannot literally make God more important or give God greater status! On the other hand, a human can reveal something that makes the importance or the status of God far more evident to the rest of us. I think that's what's we are to understand here.

If you look closely at the sentence structure, you will notice that Mary's soul--not just her song--magnifies or enlarges our understanding of who God is and what God is about. This song is about who she is, and by extension who any of us are, in the eyes of God. As we see how God sees us, we may come to see God a bit differently, in wider or richer terms than before. We too will magnify the Lord. And rejoice.

Then, line 3: "he has regarded the low estate of his handmaiden." Line 3 is the song's only explanation of God's motives or his meaning in doing "great things" for this insignificant young woman. What does it mean, then, that God "regarded the low estate" of Mary?

"Regarded" can mean simply "looked at" or "noticed." But that's not all it means, just as "magnify" doesn't simply mean "praise." "Regard" also means to hold in great esteem, to value highly. And therein lies the key to understanding the high/low patterns organizing this text.

Notice, if you will, line 3, that God does not "regard" Mary herself, directly, as an individual. Now I'm sure God thought Mary was a great person. I'm not disputing that. But notice: the line does not say, "he has regarded me despite my low estate." That's not what it says. God holds Mary's rock-bottom *status* in high esteem. God particularly values and cherishes the very worst kind of nobody, which is a female nobody. After all, remember that even centuries later, the "church fathers" were seriously debating whether women have souls. In most of the world, women are still regarded as something less than fully human--often as little more than property. Women preachers and ministers are still not welcomed in many congregations. But God holds in high regard what the world completely disregards. That's a dangerous understanding of God, one still capable of overturning the hierarchical, exclusionary character of the churches.

And it gets worse. This "regarded" business in line 3 is just the beginning. We have to keep going here, but we have to keep line 3 in mind as we do so.

So let's look at line 4: "for behold, henceforth all generations will call me blessed." When Mary says in line 4 that all generations will call her blessed, I think she is proclaiming herself the matriarch of what we used to call the "new covenant," just as Abraham was patriarch of the "old covenant." He too was promised that all generations would see him as a blessing for them.

But some of the authors and editors of Hebrew scripture, perhaps many of them, thought that the covenant with Abraham was indeed about the control of land and political power. It was--or so many passages seem to argue--about a Jewish empire to rival and then to vanquish other human political empires. Some day, all nations will bring political tribute to Jerusalem.

Other Hebrew writers and readers--then and now--understood such claims metaphorically. They read them "spiritually." But there is ample evidence to support the literal, socio-political reading.

Someday the Jews will rule the world. It seems to me that tension between these two readings of the covenant with Abraham run all through Hebrew scripture.

But "blessing" is a tricky concept in Hebrew, and structurally speaking this is very clearly Hebrew poetry even though Luke wrote in Greek. A very close look at the Hebrew word "blessing" will begin to show us how Mary's song is re-reading the straightforward power-and-prosperity interpretation of God's covenant with Abraham.

Blessing is a tricky word because it has three levels of meaning, arrayed like ripples spreading outward from a stone tossed into water. At its most rudimentary word-stem core, "blessing" refers to that which makes something count as "alive." Blessing refers to what biologists used to call the "life force." Literally speaking, at least in Hebrew, life itself is a blessing. It is a blessing just to be alive. You've heard that before, yes?

Because life is a blessing, whatever fosters and propagates life is a blessing. That's the second level. When Adam and Eve are blessed and told to be fruitful and multiply, that's a classic Hebrew-poetry doublet: blessed and fertile are quite nearly synonyms. And so, children are a blessing. We have all heard that too, and it comes from this Hebrew word. And so, Mary is blessed simply because she is pregnant. And there are other kinds of blessings, other ways in which life can be fostered. Peace and prosperity, seasonable weather and good harvest are blessings as well. Promotions and pay raises, light traffic and easy parking spaces--all these are blessings too. Taught by the Jews, taught by the Bible, this is how we still use the word "blessing."

But as Ecclesiastes warns us, the race is not always to the swift, nor bread to men of wisdom. If children are a blessing, are the infertile cursed? There's plenty of anxiety about that all through scripture! If prosperity is a blessing, are the poor and the homeless cursed? What about that? If peace is a blessing, what about people whose lives are torn by racial and economic violence? Are *they* cursed?

I don't think so. The Jews have suffered too much, and for too long, to make any simple-minded equation between wealth or power and God's love. As I have said elsewhere, if peace-and-prosperity were the sum of God's intent in blessing the Jews, God chose his chosen people very badly. He should have chosen the Swiss, locked away safely behind high mountains. Or maybe the Hawaiian Islanders--just as isolated, but with much nicer weather and a couple of terrific volcanoes for the ten commandments scene. Lots of very dramatic water to part. Don't choose these poor hapless Jews, struggling in a harsh desert climate and trapped at the crossroads of competing empires. If they are "blessed," heaven help the rest of us! Let's be Cubs fans--not Christians.

Hence the third level of the word "blessing"--the blessing of all blessings--is to love our neighbors as ourselves and God above all *no matter what's going wrong in our lives*. If blessing at its core means "life", in its fully developed form blessing also means "love." It is a blessing to love God and to love one another even when there's not enough food to go around, even when shots ring out and the Gestapo pound on the door. It is a blessing for us to be gathered here together today, *even though* we will never rule the world. We will never rule the world, but we

can--and we must--love one another. We must regard one another fully. That much we can try to do. Our honest effort is enough. It's everything. And our ability to struggle to love one another--to regard each other as God regards us--is God's blessing upon us.

Henceforth all generations will call Mary blessed because in her extraordinarily dangerous pregnancy she was given the first glimpse of this ultimate proof that the power of the Almighty One is the power of love, not the power to respond with overwhelming force when our political power and socioeconomic status are threatened. She literally reconceived who we are not simply as individuals but as a society hell-bent on hierarchy and upon the violence necessary to sustain hierarchy. Her willingness to abide with this Good News kicking and squirming inside her, her willingness to birth and to nurse and patiently to rear this great gift, to see him die humiliated and in agony--that gutsy willingness is for us the single great model of the life of faith.

Mary is not given laser-guided cannons, or smart bombs, or nuclear submarines. Mary is given an infant as helpless as any other infant, and before that a potent threat to her own life in a culture that violently enforced masculine control over feminine sexuality. The model of faith she embodies is a very difficult model. And it is deeply threatening to any status quo except the reign of God. Symbolically speaking, archetypally speaking, there is no more potent threat to everything that "masculinity" and "power" represents than the threat of feminine sexuality that is not subservient to male control.

Line 5 is the third line of this set: "for he who is mighty has done great things for me." Literally speaking, the "great thing" that God has done for Mary is to generate this pregnancy for which, as an apparently adulterous woman, she is liable to public stoning. (God has strange ideas about what it means to do someone favors, no doubt about that!) In socio-political and ecclesial terms, however, the great thing God has done is this business of highly esteeming the powerless and the insignificant. Power and status as the world defines them are no particular proof of God's favor.

We have nothing to prove to God, and that is a revolutionary recognition. It's revolutionary because it can free us from trying to prove ourselves to one another. It's revolutionary because it can deconstruct the ordinary apparatus of social and cultural control whereby the elite sustain themselves in power. This truth about God is far more dangerous than troops, or terrorists, or weapons of mass destruction. No wonder Mary sings, "and his mercy is on those who fear him from generation to generation." Take this blessing seriously, she says, and pass it on to *your* children. If you dare.

The first part of the second stanza--are you still with me here?--repeats and develops the antithesis between high and low that we saw at the opening of the first stanza. But now the tension is not between the mightiness of God and the lowliness of a peasant woman. Here the tension is between people in power and people outside of power. Lines 9 through 14 echo and re-echo with this antithesis two or even three times in each line. Let's take another look at these lines:

He has shown strength with his arm,	9
he has scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts,	10
he has put down the mighty from their thrones,	11
and exalted those of low degree;	12
he has filled the hungry with good things,	13
and the rich he has sent empty away.	14

People move up and down, inward and outward; they are filled and they are empty-handed. God scatters and fills, exalts and puts down, demonstrates his power and demonstrates his concern for the powerless.

From all that wealth of detail, I want to point out three things. First, as God "regards" Mary's estate and not her individual or personal identity, so also God scatters the proud not as individual people but rather "in the imagination of their hearts." What a phrase! In the imagination of their hearts. God blows their minds, as kids say. They imagine that they are better than the rest of us. Closer to God. Approved of by God. But they are wrong: God is not behind the status quo.

My second observation is closely related: God sends the proud away empty, because even God can't give anything to people who are that full of themselves. You cannot have the good things God offers if you are possessed by the illusions of power that the world offers. God becomes human among the outcast and the marginalized, the impoverished and unclean, thereby demonstrating--among other things--that to be filled we must first be emptied of what a consumerist culture tells us we simply have to have. If we are to receive the things of God, first we have to set down all the other stuff that clutters our lives and our souls.

That too is a very subversive idea: God loves each of us, all of us, equally, beyond merit and beyond imagining. It is a blessing just to be alive: holiness itself is within us and upon us. People who believe they already have what matters most in life are very difficult to manipulate, very difficult to manage.

Finally, notice that all these verbs are in the present perfect tense, which indicates actions that took place at some unspecified moment prior to the present moment (e.g., *I have been to Iowa* or *I have planted a tree in Brooklyn*.) God has already accomplished this stunning reversal of the status quo. The rich have already been bewildered, put down from their thrones, sent away empty. The poor have already been exalted and filled with good things. God has been there, done that.

What in the name of heaven is going on here? Last time I looked, the powerful were still in power! "Dementia of pregnancy," a still small voice whispers in my ear. This is just another crazy woman; don't listen to her. Or reconfigure it all, do the hermeneutic two-step, turn it into "pie in the sky when you die" rather than the immediate reality that Mary asserts.

That's one option. Another is to understand that this is visionary poetry from the ancient world. Contra-factual assertions are part of how visionary poetry works, especially in the ancient world.

Ancient-world literary and rhetorical devices can be remarkably opaque for modern-language readers: we have to be quite careful, attentively open to seeing levels of reality that the modern world has lost sight of.

And so--I contend that these verbs are in the present perfect tense (a nuanced version of the past tense, essentially) because the enlightened soul sees the world through very different eyes. The enlightened soul sees beyond money and power to the moral bankruptcy and personal hollowness of people who let stuff and status be the measure of their souls. God has always already loved us, which in practical terms exalts the impoverished but enlightened soul. Mary, as our premier instance of the enlightened soul, realizes with her new eyes that the powerful *have lost* their power, the high-and-mighty *have lost* their exalted status--their power and their status *in her eyes*. It has always already been thus, but now she sees it and sings, "he who is mighty has done great things for me." There is new life in her, both biologically and spiritually. She now realizes she is not a morally reprobate, utterly insignificant unmarried mother--not because God has plucked her from among the nameless women around some well for special privileges, but because God *has regarded her lowliness*. God values what others contemptuously disregard, what others would exploit or murder so as to avenge and secure their own "honor."

The conception of Jesus (like the concept of Jesus, if you will) stunningly proclaims God's regard for humanity, for all of humanity, regardless of status or gender or net income. And so *all generations* will call this woman blessed, fulfilling and extending the promise to Abraham that through his descendents all the nations of the world would be blessed.

I said at the outset that the Magnificat is both astounding and dangerous. It is astounding and dangerous because it upends all the ways in which the powers that be have appropriated all that is God and all that is of God unto themselves for their own purposes and status. Mary both proclaimed and revealed that God is more, and God is different, than what empire and institutions have made of God. And so Mary concludes by quite stunningly appropriating the covenant with Abraham: the promised land is not real estate, ladies and gentlemen. It is not fertile acres and fat sheep. It is an inner state. It is a spirit that rejoices in God our savior even when we remain absolute nobodies trapped in fairly serious trouble.

The Magnificat testifies that God changes the world by changing hearts, by opening eyes--not by violence. "He who has eyes to see, let him see," Jesus later demands. And having seen the world and ourselves in these new ways, of course we will live into the new landscape of our lives, doing what shows up and demands to be done. If this is "piety," it is piety with a political edge. If this is "holiness," then it is holiness called forth to mess with the world. Teach people to pray, the nuns taught me, then stand back: God will take it from there, because true prayer is dangerously transforming. The contemplative traditions have always understood this: the true church is not a place to hide in.

Mary's dangerous song can be tamed, of course. It can be eviscerated--it has been eviscerated--by those who portray Mary as "virgin meek and mild." The Virgin Mary has too often served as the archetypal model of passive compliance and meek obedience, especially for women. Behind such demands for our meek compliance and absolute obedience, I always see the shadows cast by power elites--by those who hold authority in these "authoritative" institutions. And then I'm

glad I grew up reciting the Magnificat in school every day after lunch, under the watchful eye of 1960's nuns determined to form us as Christians ready to refuse what the world calls "normal." And so I can hum this tune and stand firm--singing not "When I Rule the World" but "he who is mighty has done *great things* for me."

And for you. For any of us. A mighty promise has been made, not only to Abraham our father, but to Mary our mother and to each of us as well: henceforth all generations will call us blessed. Not rich, not powerful, but holy--and holding our heads up high.

Amen, alleluia.

Postscript: on nonviolence

In an aside, I ad-libbed some remarks about how the concept of "due regard" solves rhetorical problems in how best to define pacifism, a principle to which the Ekklesia Project is committed. This is more or less what I said, as far as I can reconstruct it, for all those who later asked me for a copy of my remarks.

The concept of "due regard" may solve some of the problems discussed yesterday about the inadequacy of defining pacifism simply in passive and negative terms such as "nonviolence."

To explain what I mean, I need a device for rhetorical analysis that is commonly called the Aristotelian square of opposition. Imagine a square. In the bottom left corner, name a virtue; in the opposite, upper right corner, name the corresponding vice. Love, for instance, and hate. Or, in this instance, due regard for others versus violence. It looks like this:

the excess: *idolatry*	the opposite: *violence*
the virtue: *due regard*	the defect: *nonviolence*

What do you do with the other two corners? That's where the device gets interesting. The upper left corner is the virtue taken to excess, which here I'd call "idolatry." Idolatry is the sin of investing excessive or inappropriate value into something, such as American global military dominance or secure access to Arab oil, or maybe tenure or "church growth." We are all deeply liable to the temptations of idolatry. The lower right corner is called the "subaltern," which is the

virtue in some seriously undeveloped form. Here, I contend, the undeveloped form of due regard is mere "nonviolence." Nonviolence is about *my* restraint or *my* refusal to act, not about behaving in accord with a coherent understanding of what I owe to other people no matter what.

One such coherent understanding of what we owe one another, I suggest, is the Christian teaching, inherited from the Jews, that all human beings are made in the image of God. Because we all carry the *imago dei* within us, indelibly, we are metaphysically obligated to love our neighbors as ourselves.

Now, then: People commonly challenge pacifists with questions about defending our own children or, for men, defending their wives against rape. Sometimes the questions are intended as an immediate insult, especially among men; and often the question is taken as such. Nonetheless, it is a good question, often a question asked in good faith. We need good answers to it. People who ask such questions in good faith are, in effect, pointing out that the failure to defend one's family is a failure of due regard for one's family. And if our family members count on us, and we want them to do so or we believe their trust is valid, why not extend that sense of responsibility to the community as a whole?

It's an easy two-step to get from this point to signing up for the Marines, at least if you are a morally responsible young male idealist of a certain size and athletic prowess. Surely many of the men currently serving in the military--or in the New York police department or fire department--often do so from exactly this sense of keen personal responsibility to the common good of this nation. *All things being equal,* I think that is a coherent, morally responsible position. And so let me repeat: we need to be able to talk to people who make this argument against pacifism. Furthermore, those of us who live and work outside of academia need to know how to do so without recourse to elaborate philosophic abstractions and academic jargon. Failing to do so is failing in due regard for those who think we are crazy or dangerously naive.

My answer, based on thinking prompted by the square of opposition, goes like this: pacifism is not at stake when the issue at hand is resisting street crime, a situation in which due regard for thugs conflicts flatly with due regard for one's family or neighbors. In *The Heart of Altruism*, Kristen Renwick Monroe interviews a little old lady who hobbled down the stairs with her cane when a rapist attacked a neighbor of hers. The old lady waled at the rapist with her cane, screaming for help until another young man showed up, wrestled the attacker to the ground, and some third person called the police. I like old ladies with that sort of generosity and courage. And her non-lethal reaction is consistent with pacifism as I understand it because, to repeat, pacifism is not primarily addressed to the question of how most wisely to respond to street crime against persons.

On the other hand, pacifism is properly addressed to the claim that murder--including capital punishment and torture--is a legitimate instrument of national policy, as if killing people is an unquestionable right of the state.

Secondly--It seems to me that we cannot surrender to the state the right to murder someone unless first we possess that right ourselves. But we don't have an inalienable right to kill one

another, even on minimally rationalist or secular grounds. What is morally abhorrent for us as individuals cannot be acceptable for us as a community.

Let me repeat: the Aristotelian square of opposition is a method of rhetorical analysis. It is a technique in the toolbox of literary critics. It does not, in itself, provide a complete or rigorous account of pacifism. It's not trying to. But it is a useful little widget nonetheless, because it can open out questions. Its contribution here is how it shifts attention away from passive just-stand-there versions of nonviolence toward the very much richer, more honestly difficult question of what sort of irrevocable or metaphysical regard we owe to other human beings no matter what. I have not engaged those difficult questions to any serious extent: that's not my point. My point here is illustrating how the square of opposition can clear the ground for reasonable and reasoned conversation, which I take it is central to the goals of the Ekklesia Project.

So let us go forth to argue with gladness and singleness of heart . . .

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A lecture at the Ekklesia Project annual meeting, with an ad-lib excursus on defining pacifism. Given at DePaul University, Chicago, Ilinois, on July 20, 2004.