

“Lord & Taylor, Ann Taylor, Anne Klein, Calvin Klein.

Cuisinart, Walmart, K Mart, Kodak, cotton polyester, budget stretcher, storewide, half off, dot com.

Old Navy, New Balance, Ear buds, Foot Locker, Abs toner.

Beanie Baby, Fry Daddy, Bugle Boy, Gameboy, Rubber Maid, Mister Coffee, PayPal, poly-pro, plastic snow, plastic trees, two ID’s, all sales final, simulated wood grain vinyl.

UPS, CVS, JVC, DVD, LCD, LED, IPA, GE, GI Joe, IJ Fox, TJ Maxx, fax, Pentax, FedEx, AmEx, gortex, Memorex, Reebox, ties and socks, woofer, tweeter, quartz heater.

iPhone, iPod, iPad, iCloud, iTunes, Izod, Ibuprofen. J Crew, Jontue, Jean Nate, Cache, Faberge, Ebay, automatic layaway.

Nintendo, Norelco, Polo, Playdoh, Leggo, Elmo, Toro, Speedo, Cassio, Costco, Hasbro, Tyco, Tonka, Barbie, Dolby, Duracell, EverReady, cable-ready, rechargeable, returnable, recordable, digital, Kindle.

Waterproof, ovenproof, shockproof, 90 proof, helter skelter, Alka Seltzer.

Analog, London Fog, Canadian Club, Scotch Tape, Irish Mist, English Leather, British Sterling, sterling silver.

Alexa, Siri, Lady Schick, sure stick, non-stick, Water Pik, Shreve Crump, low-watt, instapot.

One step, two lux, three speed, four slice, Sachs Fifth Ave, six pack, Seagram’s 7, 1-800, 9 volt, 10-speed, 12-cup, 24 hour, 55 inch, mega-giga-terabyte.

White sale, Black Friday, BluRay, infrared, Walgreen’s, Black and Decker, spelling checker, what the heck? Deck the halls with Hitachi, Mitsubishi, Sansui, Fuji, Yeti, Sony, Seiko, Sanyo, Panasonic, ultrasonic, instamatic, automatic, anti-static, alkaline, online, nine-to-nine, get in line, Calvin Klein, Anne Klein, Ann Taylor, Lord & Taylor.

Good Lord, what have we done to Christmas?”

Aficionados of National Public Radio may recognize that as a revised version of Charles Kraemer’s “Ode to Christmas” which he updated every year for a two decades until his retirement. Now, I am a person who generally enjoys the merriment and even the excesses of the holiday season, and I never pledged the sour fraternity of clerical Christmas killjoys. But even I have to ask Kraemer’s question. “Good Lord, what have we done to Christmas?”

The question presses itself upon me with a certain urgency this year, as the gap between the overprivileged and the rest of the world’s population becomes a dangerous and threatening chasm. Scripture addresses the inequities between poor and rich with a frequency that may surprise some among us. The American Bible Society, for example, published the Poverty and Justice Bible. It’s a standard English translation of the Old and New Testaments, nothing added or deleted; but what makes this Bible different is that it highlights in bright orange the more than 2,000 verses that wake us up with Scripture’s messages regarding poverty and injustice. Few passages speak more clearly or eloquently to those matters than the one we’ve just heard and which the choir performed from the opening chapter of St. Luke’s Gospel.

I’m referring, of course to the song Mary sang when she learned that she would become the mother of our Lord. It’s called the Magnificat for the song’s first word in Latin, “magnify.” (“My soul now *magnifies* the Lord.”) What do we do when we magnify something? We make it larger, often so we can better make out the details. That’s what Mary does here. She enlarges the astonishing good news that she – a poor young girl living in a land occupied by a hostile foreign empire – will bear the savior of the world, and in so doing, she helps us examine what that good news means for us and for all people.

It is the *shape* of Mary’s song to which I would direct your attention this morning. Her song begins with an intensely personal focus, as she gives thanks for what the Lord has done specifically and uniquely for her. “My soul,” she sings – my innermost being – “magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior.” Why? “for he has looked with favor

on the lowliness of his servant. Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed; for the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name.” Like faith itself, God’s word is always intensely personal, but it is never merely private. It speaks to the core of our being, and we pray to the source of our being in ways that are specific to the concerns and hopes and fears and joys of our wonderfully unique lives. God’s word speaks to the depths of our souls, but it doesn’t stop there – and neither does Mary’s song. It opens to larger realities the way a flower bud blossoms to greater and more radiant beauty.

The mother of our Lord proceeds from the personal to the communal: “His mercy is on those who fear him from generation to generation.” And she then paints for us a shocking picture of what God’s mercy looks like, using words we would scarcely expect from a young maiden living in a conquered and occupied land. Mary sings of the Lord’s mercy using these words:

“He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty.”

Where and when Mary’s Son is worshipped, and Mary’s Song is sung, and even a fraction of that song’s astounding implications are understood, there and then the rich and mighty have something to worry about. For Mary’s Song sings – and Mary’s Son incarnates – the love of a God who acts in history to scatter and cast down; to lift up, gather and fill with good things.

When Pr. Eugene Peterson paraphrased the Bible in modern English, he rendered this portion of the Magnificat with these words:

“He bared his arm and showed his strength and scattered the bluffing braggarts. He knocked tyrants off their high horses and pulled victims out of the mud. The starving poor sat down to a banquet; the callous rich were left out in the cold.”

THAT’S what God’s mercy looks like for the 99%: It looks like justice rendered to the 1% and those who defend them, protect them, and keep them in power. It looks like a reversal of earthly fortunes. Are the 1% beyond the scope of God’s grace and mercy? Of course they are not. The Babe now in Mary’s womb will die and rise for the forgiveness of their sins, too. That Babe, grown to full manhood, summons them – summons all of us – to share this life and this world’s abundance; to seek justice beyond charity for widows and orphans and refugees and asylum seekers and homeless veterans and victims of abuse, and the hardcore unemployable – in short, is summons us to genuine communion and solidarity with all those who are encompassed by the biblical term “the poor.”

Mary’s Son, like Mary’s Song, subverts the world’s interpretation of what is real and worthwhile and to be desired. Jesus magnifies the mystery of love incarnate, love made flesh, so that we might better make out the details. And when we look closely, we see that love is manifest in Mary’s baby, to be sure, and also in the love borne in each of our hearts – for God, for each other, for our enemies, for the poor, and for the world God created, redeemed, and continues to sustain.

When we, like Mary, respond with our souls – with our inmost being – to God’s good news with a sincere and humble “Let it be with me according to your word,” then the bud of faith will blossom into the glorious flower of peace and justice. And people who behold the remarkable transformation will say, “Good Lord, what have they done to Christmas?!”