At my first training weekend as a curate the then Bishop of Barking, David Hawkins, performed a handstand to demonstrate the way in which Jesus, through his teaching in the beatitudes, turns our understanding of life upside down. He was thinking of the way in which Jesus startles us as paradox, irony and surprise permeate his teachings flipping our expectations upside down: the least are the greatest; adults become like children; the religious miss the heavenly banquet; the immoral receive forgiveness and blessing. Bishop David’s action turned our expectations, as curates, of Bishops and their behaviour upside-down at the same time that it perfectly illustrated his point.

Donald Kraybill wrote a classic book on the kingdom of God which used this same imagery as its title and defining metaphor. ‘The Upside-Down Kingdom’ shows how the kingdom of God announced by Jesus appeared upside-down in first-century Palestine and continues to look upside-down as it breaks into diverse cultures around the world today. That image and the visual metaphor of Bishop David’s handstand can just as easily be applied to the Magnificat, the song sung by Mary following her meeting with Elizabeth (about which we heard in today’s Gospel reading) with all of the great reversals contained within it; ‘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.’ Turning upside-down, as in a handstand, involves a revolution and, because of its great reversals, the Magnificat has been called ‘the most beautiful and revolutionary hymn in the world’; one that ‘is redolent of theologically and politically destabilizing realities.’

In a Holy Week meditation I wrote a few years ago based on Jesus’ meeting with Pilate I explored similar revolutions to those articulated in the Magnificat by seeing Pilate as “representing / the oppressive, controlling / Empire of dominating power, / with its strength in numbers / and weaponry, / which can crucify / but cannot / set free” while Jesus represents “the kingdom of God; / a kingdom of love, / service and self-sacrifice / birthing men and women / into the freedom /to love one another.” Our choice is then: “The way of compassion or the way of domination; / the way of self-sacrifice or the way of self; the way of powerlessness or the way of power; the way of serving or the way of grasping; the kingdom of God or the empires of Man.”

Today, though, I want to focus briefly on relational revolutions deriving from this story. The first is that the Magnificat was sung by an obscure young Jewish girl who has become one of the most important figures in the global faith that is Christianity. This example of expectations being turned upside down is captured well by Malcolm Guite in his sonnet for the Feast of the Visitation:

Here is a meeting made of hidden joys
Of lightenings cloistered in a narrow place
From quiet hearts the sudden flame of praise
And in the womb the quickening kick of grace.
Two women on the very edge of things
Unnoticed and unknown to men of power
But in their flesh the hidden Spirit sings
And in their lives the buds of blessing flower.
And Mary stands with all we call ‘too young’,
Elizabeth with all called ‘past their prime’
They sing today for all the great unsung
Women who turned eternity to time
Favoured of heaven, outcast on the earth
Prophets who bring the best in us to birth.

Mary has been given many titles down the ages but the earliest ‘title’, agreed throughout the church in the first centuries of our faith, before the divisions of East and West, Catholic and Protestant, was Theotokos, which means God-Bearer. Mary is the prime God-Bearer, bearing for us in time the One who was begotten in eternity, bringing Jesus to us and, therefore, as woman and mother, the one who has been closest to God. Every Christian after her should “seek to become in some small way a God-bearer, one whose ‘yes’ to God means that Christ is made alive and fruitful in the world through our flesh and our daily lives, is born and given to another” (https://malcolmguite.wordpress.com/tag/mary/). Mary’s role, as Theotokos, challenges the patriarchy of the society in which she lived, as well as that of the Church throughout much of its history.

Patriarchy is also challenged by another revolutionary aspect of Mary’s story and that is the Virgin Birth. The primary purpose of patriarchy is to assure the man of the legitimacy of his offspring. “Patriarchy’s investment in systems that ensure proof of authorial possession results from the necessity of overcoming male anxiety over the ultimate uncertainty of biological paternity. Although the woman always knows she is the mother - through her physical connection with the developing foetus - the man never knows for sure that he is the father, and thus has a high stake in maintaining a system by which he can claim paternal ‘ownership’.” (Amelia Jones, quoted in ‘Re-Enchantment’ - http://www.jameselkins.com/index.php/academic-books/234-the-art-seminar-series)

But, as we know, in the Nativity story Joseph is not the father of Jesus and does not know whether Mary has slept with another man or not. A different role is asked of Joseph from that of the Patriarch; that of being the guardian and foster-father of Jesus. So, Jesus’ birth occurs outside of or at a tangent to patriarchal systems or structures. Jesus, himself, is a man who doesn’t marry and who has no physical offspring - the furtherance of his ‘seed’ is of no interest to him. His emphasis is on his followers as his family, rather than his blood and adoptive relatives. His death is for the entire family of God - all people everywhere – and he teaches that after the resurrection people will neither marry or be given in marriage.

As a result, the philosopher Thierry De Duve has suggested that the: “great invention, the great coup of Christianity”, resulting from the Virgin Birth, “is to short-circuit” patriarchal ownership and a “production line that fabricates sons” (‘Re-Enchantment’). Robert Song has argued that the advent of Christ changes our understandings of sexuality because there is a “fundamental shift in horizons brought about the resurrection.” In the resurrection life there will be no marrying or giving in marriage, Jesus says, and behind his thinking is the idea that where there is no death, there will be no need for birth or marriage. Subverting the patriarchal system through the Virgin Birth and removing the necessity for procreation through the resurrection opens up space in which to reimagine marriage, including the possibility of a greater diversity of relational and family structures in society characterised by faithfulness, permanence and fruitfulness. Robert Song calls these “faithful covenanted relationships”; committed relationships which are sexually active but non-procreative (https://durhamabbeyhouse.wordpress.com/2014/10/31/book-launch-robert-songs-new-book-on-same-sex-relationships/).

The anthropologist Daniel Miller in quoted in the current edition of ‘The Big Issue’ as saying that “Christmas is a festival that aims to make the family not just sacred but an idiom for society more
generally, including the local community or neighbourhood but also the national family.” In Britain, he suggests, “we place considerable emphasis on re-establishing a version of the domestic at Christmas time, rediscovering a certain sentimentality for this idealised version of family life.” The article then notes that, of course, “this rose-tinted vision is a world away from the reality many people live through at Christmas” because we do not enjoy “such an idealised family festival.”

However, if we were to grasp as a society the unconventional and non-idealised relationships which God chose to reveal himself and be incarnated through the birth of Jesus – a conception outside of marriage, a relationship on the brink of divorce, a foster-father, a birth in cramped and crowded circumstances, an immediate threat to life followed by refugee status – we might then understand the reality of incarnation; of God with us in the reality, not the ideality, of our lives.

For Mary and Elizabeth to be caught up in events with such revolutionary implications - events which turn our understanding of societal norms for relationships upside down – was far from easy. “Behind Elizabeth and Zechariah’s joy at the birth of their son John was the knowledge that they had lost an insonably long number of years to enjoy watching him grow up.” “At the edge of Gabriel’s annunciation was the social stress that Mary would endure in a society where it was all about your embedded role in the community.” She was not believed, either by those closest to her and those who didn’t really know her. Engaged to Joseph when the annunciation occurred, as she was found to be with child before they lived together, Joseph planned to dismiss her quietly. He had his own meeting with Gabriel which changed that decision but, if the man to whom she was betrothed, could not believe her without angelic intervention, then it would be no surprise if disbelief and misunderstanding characterised the response to Mary wherever she went. And “lurking over Joseph’s shoulder was the gossip that would nag him all his life, that he is merely the putative father of Jesus.” (W. David O. Taylor - http://artspastor.blogspot.co.uk/2013/12/the-annunciation-really-weird-story.html)

Bearing all this in mind, we can imagine how much Mary needed the moment of empathy and inspiration described in today’s Gospel reading because the experience of being the God-bearer involved such difficulty. We can imagine how important it was to her to be with a relative who not only believed her but was also partway through her own miraculous pregnancy. The relief that she would have felt at being believed and understood would have been immense and then there is the shared moment of divine inspiration when the Holy Spirit comes on them, the babe in Elizabeth’s womb leaps for joy, and as Elizabeth blesses Mary, Mary is inspired to sing the Magnificat. In the face of so much disbelief and lack of support, this confirmation that they were both following God’s will, would have been overwhelming.

We can learn much from Mary’s faith, trust and persistence in the face of disbelief, misunderstanding and probable insult. We can also learn from this moment when God gives her both human empathy through Elizabeth and divine inspiration through the Holy Spirit to be a support and strengthening in the difficulties which she faced as God-bearer. Our own experience in times of trouble and difficulty will be similar as, on the one hand, God asks to trust and preserve while, on the other, he will provide us with moments of support and strengthening.

As we have already heard Malcolm Guite suggesting, every Christian after Mary should “seek to become in some small way a God-bearer, one whose ‘yes’ to God means that Christ is made alive and fruitful in the world through our flesh and our daily lives, is born and given to another.” Mary bore Jesus into the revolutions of her day and time; revolutions which began with her bearing of Jesus and continued in and through his ministry, death and resurrection. We are called to bear Jesus into the revolutions of our own day and time; even bearing him in such a way that new revolutions begin.
Christ is born in each one of us as we open our lives to him and we then bear, carry or take him to others as our daily lives reveal aspects of his character and love to others. As Teresa of Avila said: “Christ has no body but yours, / No hands, no feet on earth but yours, / Yours are the eyes with which he looks / Compassion on this world, /Yours are the feet with which he walks to do good, / Yours are the hands, with which he blesses all the world. / Yours are the hands, yours are the feet, / Yours are the eyes, you are his body. / Christ has no body now but yours, / No hands, no feet on earth but yours, / Yours are the eyes with which he looks / compassion on this world. / Christ has no body now on earth but yours.” In this way, we bear him to others.

Malcolm Guite’s poem ‘Theotokos’ sums up some of the different ways in which Mary’s experience can speak to us and inspire us in the challenges we face as we go through life. In its final lines, it also suggests a possible response to those challenges and experiences:

You bore for me the One who came to bless
And bear for all and make the broken whole.
You heard His call and in your open ‘yes’
You spoke aloud for every living soul.
Oh gracious Lady, child of your own child,
Whose mother-love still calls the child in me,
Call me again, for I am lost, and wild
Waves surround me now. On this dark sea
Shine as a star and call me to the shore.
Open the door that all my sins would close
And hold me in your garden. Let me share
The prayer that folds the petals of the Rose.
Enfold me too in Love’s last mystery
And bring me to the One you bore for me.