'Mary, Mary, quite contrary, how does your garden grow?' is a well-known English nursery rhyme which seems first to have been published in the middle of the 18th century. Its origins are shrouded in mystery but it is thought that it might be referring either to Mary Queen of Scots or to the English Queen Mary I. ‘Mary, Mary, quite contrary, how does your garden grow? With silver bells, and cockle shells, and pretty maids all in a row.’

There is, of course, another Mary whom we have in mind at this time of year and on this, the fourth Sunday in Advent, in particular. The Blessed Virgin Mary, honoured as the mother of our Lord. But she is usually thought of as being as far as it’s possible to be from ‘Mary, Mary, quite contrary’. She certainly isn’t difficult, is she? She doesn’t make a fuss. She simply and humbly accepts what is happening to her. Indeed, her response to the news that her life is literally to be taken over comes across as extraordinarily passive. Chapter 1 of Luke’s Gospel records her as saying: ‘Here am I, the servant of the Lord; – literally the Lord’s slave, yours to do whatever you want with – let it be with me according to your word.’ Nothing contrary there – quite the reverse. But that’s not the end of the story...

We don’t usually think of the traditional service of Choral Evensong, celebrated day by day in cathedrals, churches and chapels throughout this country and across the world, as enshrining a dangerous strand of subversion and sedition. But it does. Largely because one of its central features is something we find a little further on in Luke chapter 1: the Song of Mary, known as the ‘Magnificat’ named after the Latin translation of its first few words. When we listen to this and reflect on what it is saying we discover that ‘Mary, Mary, quite contrary’ is rather closer to the truth than we might have thought. Not least for this bit: ‘He hath put down the mighty from their seat: and hath exalted the humble and meek. He hath filled the hungry with good things: and the rich he hath sent empty away.’

It’s not often that we can say that scholars are united, especially when it comes to interpreting the Bible. But they’re at one here. They all use the word ‘revolutionary’ to describe the Magnificat. Indeed, the 20th-century Methodist Christian missionary and theologian E. Stanley Jones describes Mary’s song as “the most revolutionary document in the world.” William Barclay calls it “a bombshell” and goes on to warn us that we have read it so often that we have forgotten its “revolutionary terror”. It takes “the standards of the world and turns them upside down.” Martin Luther puts it equally starkly as he sets out the way the Magnificat “comforts the lowly and terrifies the rich.” Another commentator talks about the way in which the Magnificat “fosters revolutionaries in our churches”, saying that “the Church needs the leaven of discontent, and the Magnificat makes the church restive against poverty and wretchedness.” ‘Mary, Mary, quite contrary? Yes indeed!

This dimension of what was going on doesn’t feature very strongly in the way we usually tell the story of Christmas. But perhaps it should. Perhaps we should take a longer, harder look at the Christmas story in this rather starker light. Yes, we know full well that we’re not celebrating the birth of just any old baby. This is ‘Emmanuel’, ‘God is with us’ – with us in person, with us in a way he never has been before. As the angel says to Joseph when telling him what to expect, ‘the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.’

But it’s through Mary’s extraordinary song that we discover what this is actually going to mean in practice for our hurt and hurting world. Mary is singing about the birth of her child. This is the monumental event which gives her song its revolutionary focus of hope for the down-trodden and come-upance for the comfortable. It is through Jesus that God is going totally to change the order of things. It is through Jesus that God is going to turn everything upside
down, putting the bottom on top and the top on the bottom. It is through Jesus that God comes to revolutionize the way we think, the way we act, and the way we live.

The Church’s season of Advent tells us that, despite appearances, this really is where history is going, whether we like it or not. God’s revolution is unstoppably underway. The one born to be our Saviour will return as our Judge. Which is why Advent is also about encouraging us to make the choice to get on board with the revolution here and now. To allow our thinking to be shaped by the idea that God is in the business of putting down the mighty from their seat, of exalting the humble and meek, of filling the hungry with good things, of sending the rich away empty. And to let that affect how we behave. Both towards the powerful at the top of the pile. And towards the powerless at the bottom of the pile.

It’s about being appropriately ‘contrary’. Refusing to go along with accepted wisdom. Being content to go against the tide of public opinion. Making choices that reflect the upside-down values of God’s kingdom. Secure in the knowledge that to do so is to be on the side of the angels.

So what might we do in the coming week, not just to wish other people a merry Christmas and a happy New Year, but to make those wishes come true, especially for those in particular need? What can we do to make ‘grace and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ’ an experienced reality rather than just a pious aspiration? Amid all the captivating glitter of the festive season, may God help us to be more like Mary – so in tune with his purposes and obedient to his will that we become as contrary as he is. Amen.