

Riding high: Advent is the season for leveling and upsetting

by [Martin E. Marty](#) in the [December 4, 2002](#) issue

The text for our meditation is Luke 3:3-5 (NRSV): “Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be made low, . . .” We could add “Mary’s Song,” the Magnificat, from Luke 1:46-55, in which she praises God for having “brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly.” Advent is the season for leveling and upsetting, for repentance and abasement and for getting a perspective on one’s self.

That has always been hard to do, especially for royalty. Watchers of the British monarchy are enjoying a new tabloid-fed feeding frenzy as members of the royal family again look like the proud who need to be “scattered” or the rich to be “sent away empty.”

A recent issue of the *Robb Report*, a magazine devoted to nothing but trafficking in luxury, features her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II and offers a subtext to go with the main one appearing in the tabloids.

The text, by Paul Dean, teases with tales of extravagance in respect to “Her Majesty’s Car.” We learn that the machine cost more than the autos of even many Hollywood stars: \$15 million will buy you a Bentley Arnage R like hers. Dean tells us of the economy-minded moves of the House of Windsor: it trades in a new such car “every 25 years or 125,000 miles, whichever comes first.” Good-bye, 1977 Rolls-Royce Phantom VI. Old heap.

Many of the expensive features of the new car are unsurprising: “armor-plated cladding, a mine-resistant floor, bazooka-proof glass, and a cabin that can be sealed against a gas attack.” The Popemobile can’t stand up to the Bentley. There are predictable trappings, such as “a statuette of England’s patron, St. George.” And, the queen being modest, the car’s makers had to make concessions to her request for simplicity by reducing the chrome trim. Prince Philip found that “burred walnut trim in the rear wasn’t particularly practical,” because wearers of “medals and swords and jewels” might scar and gouge it. Same worries we all have.

Some features promote dignity. The doors are wide and high, to enable the queen to face her subjects when emerging, instead of backing out. We're still obviously dealing with a perfectly routine auto, one that anyone with \$15 million to spend could pick up tomorrow at any customizing dealer.

What quickened my Advent sensibilities was this twist: the two rear seats, where the passengers ride behind the front-seated chauffeur, are "individually adjustable for height. It is unlikely that Shaquille O'Neal will ever ride with the queen, but if he did, he and she would appear to be the same height. It's a royal thing that has to do with the presumption of authority."

We used to read of monarchs who, though always otherwise enthroned or elevated, took pains to teach themselves, their observers and their subjects a lesson at the service of Holy Communion. They would insist on kneeling at the table rail next to ordinary citizens, forgoing the appearance of the presumption of authority.

Now, in the presumably secular setting of a Bentley's rear seats, Elizabeth chooses to be "lifted up," as if she were one of the lowly, and she makes the mountainous NBA player to be "made low."

We shorter repenters of the world who, like Napoleon, cannot naturally display "the presumption of authority" by height could become great levelers if we would invest in a \$15 million Bentley, the new home of democratic appearances.

If the queen's limousine cuts you off and you are ready to react in road rage, smile instead, as you look at the two heads silhouetted against the back window. Wave and cheer this sign of equality, fraternity, democracy and Advent spirit.