

Sunday March 24th, 2024
Palm Sunday

Philippians 2:1-11
“I Want to be Like Jesus.”

Once upon a time, there was a good and kind king who had a great kingdom with many cities. In one distant city, some people took advantage of the freedom the king gave them and started doing evil. They profited by this evil and began to fear that the king would interfere and throw them in jail, or even kill them. Eventually, these rebels seethed with hatred for the king, and the city declared its independence from the kingdom.

But soon, with everyone doing whatever they wanted, disorder reigned in the city. There was violence, hatred, lying, oppression, murder, rape, slavery, and fear. The king thought: “What should I do? If I take my army and conquer the city by force, the people will fight against me. I will have to kill so many of them, and the rest will only submit through fear or intimidation, which will make them hate me and all I stand for even more.

But if I leave them alone, they’ll destroy each other, and it breaks my heart to think of the pain they’re causing and experiencing.” So, the king did something very surprising. He took off his robes and dressed in the rags of a homeless wanderer. Incognito, he entered the city, and began living in a vacant lot near a garbage dump. He took up trade-fixing broken pottery and furniture.

Whenever people came to him, his: kindness, goodness, fairness, and respect were so striking that they would linger just to be in his presence. They would tell him their fears and questions and ask his advice. He also told them that the rebels had fooled them, and that the true king had a better way to live, which he exemplified and taught. One by one, then two by two, and then by the hundreds, people began to have confidence in him and live his way.

Their influence spread to others, and the movement grew and grew until the whole city regretted its rebellion and wanted to return to the kingdom again. But, ashamed of their horrible mistake, they were afraid to approach the king, believing he would certainly destroy them for their rebellion. But the king-in-disguise told them the good news: he was himself the king, and he loved them. He held nothing against them, and he welcomed them back into his kingdom, having accomplished with a gentle, subtle presence what never could have been accomplished through brute force. (Brian McLaren-A Generous Orthodoxy)

The Apostle Paul writes about Jesus saying that, “Though he was God, he did not demand and cling to his rights as God. He made himself nothing; he took the humble position of a slave and appeared in human form. And in human form he obediently humbled himself even further, by dying a criminal’s death on a cross.” This is certainly a beautiful picture of Jesus that we can embrace warmly.

In fact, nothing pleases us more than on this Palm Sunday, and even throughout this Holy Week, to think of our wonderful Saviour humbling himself and dying a criminal’s death.

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It pleases us because we know this voluntary humiliation of God in human form, was the key to our redemption. But there is more that Paul says in this passage of Philippians that may rock our world to the core. In verse five, he hits us between the eyes with this command, “Your attitude should be the same that Christ Jesus had.” Perhaps we fail to appreciate how revolutionary this command of Paul’s is.

Consider, if you will, how adverse our society is to any kind of humility. Our shared experience as a media-soaked community is that people will do anything and everything to draw attention to themselves. If people were truly humble, one wonders if there would be any material for the tabloid newspapers or for TV programs like “E Talk Daily”, which showcases a smiling host talking about another pop star’s meltdown.

This call to an attitude like Christ Jesus is anything but easy for us. We all seem hardwired to being “upwardly mobile” or socially advancing. Every day, it seems, we are bombarded with calls to improve ourselves, and quite frankly we have listened to the siren’s song. In fact, interest in personal advancement seems to trace all the way back to Adam and Eve who sought to advance themselves and to be like God.

As sure as compasses points north, the instinctual human needle seems to point up. So, when anything or anyone comes along that prevents or suggests something other than advancement, people react as if a great trauma had occurred in their bodies. The mere mention of words like, “demotion”, “downscaling”, “decreasing”, “losing”, and “dying”, sends us scurrying away like a ground hog that has seen his shadow.

Words like this cause: high blood pressure, ulcers, and sleepless nights. We yell out, “Not me. Not me! Oh, please not me! Let’s change the subject. Let’s refocus on promotion, upscale, increases, winning, and living. Then you have my full attention. Then you will have my full enthusiastic support. Then you will get my vote.” We need to realize here, and now, how strong a hold “upward mobility” has on us.

Just think for a moment about what attracts us to a particular political party or politician. Most often we are attracted to the one who can somehow convince us that by voting for them, we will gain a step up in the quality of our lifestyle. So, we get promised shorter wait lists for health care, or hear promises of axing of levies that will lower our taxes, and we almost stampede to the ballot box.

Now on the other hand, how do we react to a politician or political party that promises more taxes, less deductions, less time off work? We are likely to turn our noses up at such platforms. We will reject this type of message even if in the long run it would be the best for us and our society.

This passage of scripture before us today and its implications are deeply unsettling. I know that messages, calling us to downward mobility, don’t sell very well. Compass needles point north, not south. Human needles point up, not down.

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In all honesty, I think you would agree with me when I state that in the entire history of Christendom, few people have had faith mature enough to embrace the values of this passage.

There have been some to be sure; like Mother Theresa, St Francis etc., but they are few and far between, I think. Furthermore, even fewer people have followed the principles of this passage with a joyful spirit. This passage of Philippians 2:5-11 is perhaps the most counter-cultural passage in scripture, especially for modern, urban, upwardly mobile individuals.

I'd like to remind us of Philippians 1:21. "For me to live is Christ," Paul says. What he is saying is that the focus of his affection is going to be Jesus Christ. For Paul to live is to live for Christ, honour Christ, proclaim Christ, obey Christ, serve Christ, and advance Christ's cause. Paul could say that and not lie. He had a well-defined life goal: namely Christ. Paul added that to die would be even better.

It would be gain because dying would allow him to be with Christ. He would be relieved of the crushing weight of the kingdom's concerns and responsibilities. To die was to gain, but what about in the here and now? What then does it truly mean to live for Christ?

We talk a great deal about being fully devoted followers of Jesus, but what does it mean? How do you do it? In consideration of this question, we come to a screeching halt at Philippians 2:5. If you want, I mean really want, to be a true follower of Jesus then you must express your faith the way Jesus did. You must think, as Jesus did. Act like Jesus acted. Have the same attitude, or mind, that Jesus does.

And just what is that attitude Jesus wants us to adopt? It is a dedication to downward mobility for the purpose of giving God glory, and of serving other people. The secret of being great in the kingdom of God, the quickest way to put a smile on your heavenly father's face, is to imitate and follow the example of Jesus. We must dedicate our lives to the downward slope that lifts Christ up, and it lifts people who are coming to know him.

Verses 6-8 remind us powerfully of the unflinching dedication Jesus had to downward mobility. Jesus was God, but he did not demand, or cling to his rights as God. He voluntarily made himself nothing, beginning with his birth in a stable. He took on the position of a slave, demonstrated at the last supper when he washed the disciples' feet. He took on human form, experiencing everything we experience, and of course he humbled himself by going to the cross.

You know how we all love those rags to riches story; stories about how some poor person has an idea or works very hard and makes their way to the top of the business or sports world. We love those stories, and we celebrate those stories in movies, biographies and television documentaries. But can we love a riches to rages story. It may be very difficult. Our hearts and minds don't seem wired that way.

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But Paul is saying to us that we are better than the world. We are deeper than the world. We don't need to be sucked into the endless treadmill to get higher, better, more influential, or more powerful. We need to wean ourselves off this intoxicating drug of worldly success that we are addicted to. I know it's hard. Perhaps that is why the heresy of the "Prosperity Gospel" is so popular.

Which message is bound to draw people more? A call that says if you believe in Jesus, you will be blessed with wealth and prosperity, or the biblical call that we are to lay down our lives for the glory of Christ. The Associated Press ran an article on May 27th, 2007, that I found quite interesting. The University of Bristol in England had been studying the behaviour of certain species of ants in the South and Central American rainforests.

Researchers noticed that advance groups of ants will voluntarily lay themselves down across potholes that stand between their foragers and food. They even go so far as to form makeshift bridges by linking themselves into chains across the chasms. By doing this they can allow other ants-sometimes numbering over 200,000-to make better time in getting nourishment. This pattern of behavior was discovered by researchers who took a wooden plank and drilled different sized holes in it, simulating a narrow trail.

Ants would find holes equal to their size and lay down inside, letting others walk safely over them. When the raiding party accomplished its mission and was returning to its nest, the faithful few who filled the potholes climbed back out and followed the raider's home. Jesus' attitude was like the ant that lay in the pothole. He could have charged into this world, bringing legions of angels, forcing us to follow him.

We may have responded to his force, but we would not have loved him. Like the king in the story, we would have resisted his coercion. Instead, he came and laid himself down on a cross, to span the chasm between ourselves and God. And because of this demonstration of downward mobility, God raised him up and made his name greater than any other name.

And how can we, not respond except to bow our knees and confess with our tongues that Jesus Christ is our Lord, to the glory of God our Father. Can we embrace the beauty represented in Christ even when it is hidden behind the cruelty of a cross?

Joshua Bell emerged from the subway in Washington D.C. and positioned himself against a wall beside a trash basket. By most measures, he was non-descript-a youngish man in jeans, a long-sleeved T-shirt, and a Washington Nationals baseball cap. From a small case, he removed a violin. Placing the open case at his feet, he shrewdly threw in a few dollars and pocket change as seed money and began to play.

For the next 45 minutes, in the D.C. Metro on January 12, 2007, Bell played Mozart and Schubert as over 1,000 people streamed by, most hardly noticing. If they had paid attention, they might have recognized the young man for the world-renowned violinist he is. They might also have noted the violin he played-a rare Stradivarius was worth over \$3 million.

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It was all part of a project by the Washington Post which they called, “an experiment in context, perception, and priorities-as well as an unblinking assessment of public taste. In a banal setting, at an inconvenient time, would beauty transcend?”

Just three days earlier, Joshua Bell sold out Boston Symphony Hall, with ordinary seats going for \$100. In the subway, Bell garnered about \$32 from the 27 people who stopped long enough to give a donation. I should mention that there is a video of the project if you want to see it.

(Pearls before Breakfast,” The Washington Post 4-10-07)

Most people that day in the subway missed the rare beauty right before their eyes. Are we any more perceptive? Can we see the beauty Paul is drawing attention to in Christ? Can we set aside worldly aspirations and embrace the crucified Christ? And can we sincerely ask God to give us the kind of faith that draws into our lives that which imitates the same attitude demonstrated by Jesus. If you can than you are well on your way to glorifying God.