

# **LENTEN REFLECTIONS**

**“On the Road to the Cross”**

**John Romeril, BA, MDiv**

---

### Acknowledgements

I am indebted to my wife and family who encouraged me to offer these reflections to a wider public, and to Marjorie Tate for the editing of my manuscript.

## **FOREWORD**

When we hear or see the word “God” today it is important to know what a speaker or writer means by the word. Our understanding of words is often changing as our understanding of the world itself is changing.

We no longer believe that we live in a three-storeyed universe and that the earth is at the centre. Ongoing developments in the study of evolution have changed the understanding about life and its origins and the earth's place in the universe.

During my lifetime additional information has been discovered concerning the origins of Christianity which has changed my interpretation of “God”.

I have come to think of “God” to be the creative intelligent spirit (energy) that is everywhere throughout the universe and present in all life. This creative Spirit seeks to enable all who are willing to be the energy for good wherever they live. “God is the one in whom we live and move and have our being.” (Acts 17:28)

Similarly, the word “Christ” is the Greek translation of the Hebrew word “Messiah”, the meaning of which, for the Jews, is “a Special Messenger” who was to come to restore the Kingdom of Israel.

Jesus, a Jew, while believing he was a special messenger, did not see his mission was to rule the Kingdom of Israel. Mark's gospel indicates that Jesus sought by word and deed to call people to a different way of life – a way of *love, i.e. agape love, unconditional caring for all people* (vastly different from that which was current in their time). Those who followed Jesus' teaching were known as the People of the Way. Through time I have come to consider Jesus to be the messenger of this creative energy, intelligent spirit, and the example of this Way of Life, lived in love for all, **even** unto death.

What could his *Way of Life* mean for us in our day and time?



## **Introduction to My Reflections on Mark's Account of Jesus' Road to Jerusalem**

Most authorities agree that Mark, written in the early 70s CE, forms the core of Matthew and Luke. Mark can be divided into 105 sections, only four of which are absent from both Matthew and Luke. Of the remaining 101 sections, 93 can be found in Matthew and 81 in Luke. There is also a considerable amount of material in Matthew and Luke which cannot be found in Mark but, even in this, when the same incident is reported in all three Gospels there is remarkable agreement.

All traditions declare the author to have been Mark. Eusebius quotes Papias, who lived in the first half of the second century CE, "Mark, having become the interpreter of Peter, wrote down accurately everything he remembered without, however, recording in order what was said or done by Christ."

His full name was John Mark. He was a native of Jerusalem. His home came to be a rendezvous for the leaders of the Jerusalem Church after Pentecost (Acts 12:12), perhaps the very house in which the last supper was eaten.

Mark may have followed Jesus to the garden on the night he was betrayed for in Mark we read of a young man who was there and left his night shirt in the hands of the arresting officer as he made his escape.

Some years later Mark accompanied Paul and Barnabas on their first missionary journey (Acts 13:5, 13) but deserted the group when they were about to head into bandit territory. Paul then refused to take him on his second missionary journey. Barnabas John, Mark's uncle, broke with Paul and the two travelled together. However, years later they were reconciled for Mark shares Paul's imprisonment in Rome (Colossians 4:10-12, Philemon 24:2 and Timothy 4:11).

Mark contains 16 chapters. The first eight deal with the ministry of Jesus in Galilee; the last eight deal with Jesus' journey towards Jerusalem and the Cross.



## **CONTENTS**

(I)	Jesus Rejected, Mark 12:10.....	1
(II)	Road to Greatness, Mark 9:33.....	7
(III)	The Needle's Eye, Mark 10:25.....	13
(IV)	Are you able", Mark 10:38 .....	19
(V)	He Cursed a Fig Tree, Mark 11:14 .....	25
(VI)	He Cleansed the Temple, Mark 11:15 .....	31
(VII)	He Acted with Authority, Mark 11:28 .....	37
(VIII)	The Cross – an Affirmation of Love, John 12:32 Galatians 6:14 .....	43





## (I) JESUS REJECTED

### TEXT:

*"The stone which the builders rejected has become the main cornerstone."*

Mark 12:10

### INTRODUCTION

Rejection is part and parcel of the human experience. Every one of us at some time in our life has experienced rejection. Some children experience rejection before birth – the pregnancy was a mistake, the child developing in the womb, unwanted, unloved, considered an economic burden. Then some experience rejection with their first report card, "How could we have brought such a stupid child into the world?" Others may experience rejection when they first tried to share a dream, "Don't be silly, you will never be able to do that. You're not smart enough." Someone else may recall the first time they confessed to be in love, and their confession was received with laughter.

Today many young people experience rejection as employers respond to their applications for work, by saying, "Your application will be kept on file. We will call you if we need you." While, for many others, having given years of faithful service, to then receive one's notice of termination, can be the toughest rejection of all.

Jesus was also one who experienced rejection. This ought not to surprise us. Jesus was not surprised as increasingly he saw himself as fulfilling the suffering servant role, first spoken of by the prophet Isaiah, who said, "He was despised..... we despised him, we held him of no account, a thing from which men turn away their eyes." This is the rejection we too can feel when we have a different dream from our contemporaries, when we feel moved to march to a different drumbeat.

Jesus saw things differently. He had his own priorities. He was determined to walk the road God had prepared for him, the road to Jerusalem, the road which was to lead to the Cross.

### A) WHY REJECTION?

Why do we turn away from those who look, speak or think differently? Why are we so quick to reject those with a different vision?

Jesus was rejected by the town crowd. They said, "Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary, the brother of James, Joseph, Judas and Simon? Are not his sisters with us?" You can hear the contempt that comes from familiarity. How could such an ordinary human being be anyone special, let alone God's special messenger?

Those of you who remember the movie *O God* will recall that a very similar question is asked. The skeptics, including the religious establishment, could not understand why God had chosen to speak through a grocery store clerk who made no claim to be religious. The establishment felt sure that if and when God decided to speak again, it would be through some famous evangelist or at least a world-renowned theologian. How could a grocery store clerk be the one? How could a carpenter be the One? He had no special training. He had not even attended the Rabbinical school. He was a tradesman. They had watched him grow up. He had made yokes for their oxen, furniture for their homes. He was a member of the working class.

This is an attitude that is still with us. Women who wish to move out of traditional roles can experience rejection. We question the appointment of those elected to parliament who are given responsibilities for which they have no experience or training. Canadian singers, painters and actors are seldom acclaimed first in their homeland. We have, as it were, a built-in prejudice against those we know.

But just as water is more than its chemical components, hydrogen and oxygen, so we are more than the sum total of our historical facts: where we were born, who our parents were, where we went to school, our training and job experience. But knowing such facts it is hard not to pigeon-hole people – he's a labourer, she's a teacher, he's a miner, she's a bank teller, he's a meat cutter, she's a housewife. We have decided their capabilities, their potential. Once we have them slotted it is hard to see that they can function anywhere else.

The people of Nazareth had put Jesus in his slot - he was a carpenter, nothing more, nothing less. As he got closer to Jerusalem, he was judged by his origins, "Can any good come out of Nazareth?"

There are those of us today who say, "Oh, he's a Paki.... She's an Indian..." and they dismiss them without another thought. But do origins give us a complete understanding of who this person is?

Scientists say that the origin of man was in protoplasm in some primordial ooze, therefore man is simply protoplasm – nothing more. To talk then of the soul of man is utter nonsense.

Some who have studied the origins of religion have come to believe that religion began out of fear, therefore all religion is based on fear. But is that a true understanding of religion?

Some say love begins with sexual attraction, a hunger, therefore love is simply a biological function. Is that true? If we limit our study of any subject to origins, we can miss a lot of truth.

The people of Nazareth rejected Jesus as Messiah because their minds were closed to new truth. They thought they knew everything there was to know about this Jesus. They had put him in his slot. But this did not stop Jesus from being the person God was calling him to be.

Why then do so many Christians put themselves down? When asked to lead a fellowship group, a prayer group, a committee of the Official Board, a mid-week group, all too often the response one hears is, "O, I'm not qualified... I don't know enough.... I am no expert in religion..."

Neither was Jesus, nor were any of the twelve whom he called to carry out his mission.

## B) NO MIGHTY WORKS

And so we were told that Jesus was unable to do any mighty works in Nazareth. This is one of the realities of life.

If you do not believe in your doctor, he or she can do little for you. A prescription is of little value unless you get it filled and take it as directed. If you have a marital problem, there is little value in going to anyone for counselling unless you believe that such action will be helpful. We all need to be affirmed by those around us.

If those with whom we live and work think we are no good, with nothing worthwhile to offer, it is unlikely that we will be able to achieve anything worthwhile. If those around us believe we have no abilities, no talents, no gifts, it is highly unlikely that they will call forth our gifts. If those around us consider us to be slow learners, lacking in understanding and knowledge, and call us stupid, we will most probably prove them right. To find yourself working for someone who always puts you down, who takes delight in pointing out your faults, your lack of ability, will not improve your productivity.

We need to be affirmed, not criticized and rejected. Of all people, we Christians should be the most positive, the most affirming. But sad to say, this is not always so. We should never be like the chairperson of a church board who opened the meeting with a beautiful prayer in which he declared that he believed that, with God, all things were possible. Then he began the business meeting by saying, "The situation is hopeless, and there is nothing anyone can do about it."

As Christians, no situation is without hope. No congregation, no committee of the congregation, no organisation anywhere can accomplish any great work unless they believe that what they are about to undertake is possible. If we, who are members of the Church of Christ, do not believe that Christ is Lord, the Alpha and Omega, then we will be, in the words of Sir William Watson,

“Outwardly splendid as of old  
Inwardly sparkles, void and cold  
Her force and fire all spent and gone  
Like the dead moon she still shines on.”

While the world may continue to tell us that the teaching of Jesus is impractical, quite irrelevant in the world today; that Jesus' view of all people as one family under God, a world in which unconditional love and goodwill should be the rule rather than the exception, is at best naïve; that life as we enjoy it today could not continue if Jesus were taken seriously; and if we succumb to the world's understanding, then there can be no mighty works in our day and generation.

### C) THE IMPORTANCE OF FAITH

Jesus, along with his mission and message, was rejected by his family, by his home town, by the religious authorities of the day, by the crowds who for a while hung on his every word, even by his disciples when face to face with the cross. They could not see beyond the facts as they had come to understand them. After all, Jesus was just a carpenter. How could anyone make a carpenter Lord of their life?

John V. Taylor in his book *The God Between God* wrote:

“If I had no faith to live by, I should yet live and believe with Him...  
what is decisive for all time is not how much we have believed, but that  
we have believed and followed Him, however little we have understood  
about Him.”

Faith is an essential ingredient to a meaningful life. To experience wholeness we must believe that health/wholeness is possible. Worship is an exercise in futility unless we believe that it is possible for God to speak to our hearts and minds through the hymns, the prayers, the readings, all that is said and done.

For any negotiations to be effective, whether between people or nations, the participants must believe that a solution to their differences is possible, therefore there must be a willingness to compromise on both sides. For couples to be reconciled requires that they believe in their

marriage. They must believe that differences can be overcome, hurts can be healed, walls of bitterness and resentment can be taken down, because they are willing to do it.

Real peace for this world is not possible unless people everywhere believe that we can live as one family. If we insist on holding on to racism, our bitterness or resentment over past wrongs, peace will be impossible. If we insist on seeing others as things, simply to be used for our own benefit, whose existence is of little importance, our continued existence being the only thing that matters, the future is very dark.

While faith in God as revealed in Jesus the Christ can make many things possible, that does not mean anything comes easily. Being obedient to God in Christ, seeking to walk the way of Christ, is no passport to easy street. "To walk with the Lord by the light of His word," as the old hymn put it, is no guarantee of a life of ease and plenty.

The way of Christ is the way of the Cross. It is a way which may have its mountains of transfiguration, it has also its valleys of blood, sweat and tears. The storms will come and go. The lightning may flash and the thunder roll, but God who came among us in Jesus and Christ, though rejected by many, never lets us go.

## CONCLUSION

As I see and hear the propaganda from both sides in the current world dispute, both in the months prior to the outbreak of hostilities and in the weeks since, I am reminded of the story about the training of an elephant.

When an elephant calf is old enough to begin its education, the trainer attaches a heavy chain to one of the elephant's front legs. The other end is fastened to a large tree. The frightened and angry animal struggles and strains, pulls and fights to free himself and return to the herd. After many days of effort the young elephant finally gives up and no longer tries to escape. From then on the elephant is conditioned to believe that any stationary object on the other end of his leg is immovable. That is why circus elephants can be tethered to small stakes in the ground. They could easily pull up the stake and be free but they are mentally shackled to the giant tree that once was on the other end of their first leg chain.

We too have been conditioned by the society in which we live to believe that the status quo is the way life has always been and always will be:

Nations do not change, people do not change.

We are always right, they are always wrong.

The world has always known the struggle for power, economic, political, military and  
now knowledge.  
Might is always right.  
My country, right or wrong.

Jesus came to free humanity from these chains but in the face of a new world crisis, in the face of our own internal national confrontation with native people, we once again reject the Prince of Peace, preferring the use of armed force to impose our will.

That did not surprise me. The faith as lived and taught by Jesus has not been a priority for most of those who live in the western world for many years, if it ever was a priority for the majority. Fewer and fewer Canadians even go through the motions that would indicate any faith priority in their lives. In other words, most Canadians, most North Americans, most Westerners do not believe that God as revealed through Jesus the Christ can change the course of history or, for that matter, even change lives. The kingdom Jesus spoke about, God's kingdom, will never come. God's will cannot be done on earth as in heaven.

Despite this attitude of the majority, I have not given up hope. The Lenten season can be a time for new beginnings. It can be a time for letting go those things that chain us to conditioned attitudes and patterns of behaviour. It can be a time for seeking to walk with Jesus on his road to Jerusalem, a journey which can bring renewal of our faith, a re-affirmation of the life God in Christ is calling us to live. A journey which could lead us to that place where each can say in his or her own way, "My Lord and my God."

As God's people live the Christ lifestyle, so the day will come when all people will want to live as one family. There is no magic wand to bring God's New Creation into being. The way to such a world is the way of the Cross,

"For the stone that the builders rejected  
has become the chief cornerstone."

## (II) THE ROAD TO GREATNESS

### TEXT:

*"They were silent, because on the way they had been discussing who was the greatest."*

Mark 9:33

### INTRODUCTION

Is there a sure and certain road to greatness? Is the road to be followed political achievement, financial power, movie or athletic stardom, or a Nobel Peace Prize? The disciples travelling with Jesus towards Jerusalem were arguing about who among them was the greatest! Can you believe it! How disappointed Jesus must have been. How could those who were so close to him have so misunderstood his message?

As they travelled towards Jerusalem, Jesus had been telling them how he was going to be delivered into the hands of men and be killed. He had been talking about his death, and they were arguing about who among them was the greatest! They had not heard a word he had been saying.

Can we put ourselves into his shoes? You have only a few weeks to live. Your family has come to visit. You would like to prepare them for your death and what it means to you. But all they want to talk about is their status in the community and the division of the estate. How would you feel?

Now let us change sides. Try standing with the disciples. How comfortable would we be discussing with a family member or a close friend their imminent death? It is the one subject most of us prefer to avoid. We will talk about anything else rather than an approaching death. And yet death is the one unavoidable experience. Sooner or later it comes to each one of us.

Yet I am sure none of us considers death as the goal of life, the road to true greatness. Instead, we think of happiness, success in our job, achieving security, being a good parent as the goal of life.

But for Jesus, as he walked his Jerusalem road, it became ever clearer that the will of God was that he should die. For Jesus, success in life, true greatness, was to be found in doing God's will even though death on the cross was the inevitable conclusion. This is a concept as hard for us to accept as it was for the first disciples. So Jesus takes them where they are, arguing about greatness, and seeks to lead them towards his view, his understanding of true greatness.

### A) GREATNESS ACCORDING TO JESUS

He opens his discussion by saying, "If anyone wants to be first, he must make himself last of all and servant of all." With these few simple words he turned the popular view of greatness, both then and now, upside down. The standards we usually apply in order to determine greatness, he declares, are obsolete.

When Royalty visits the community, or the Premier or Prime Minister, who gets invited to meet them and eat with them? I suspect that it would be the leading citizens, mayor and council, leading business people – not many unemployed, single parents or run of the mill citizens.

If Jesus were the honoured guest, would the guest list be any different? And yet for Jesus, the great people, the important people, are those who are willing to be last, willing to be one of the least, willing to be the servant. Jesus, given the choice, would want to include everyone on such a guest list.

In these simple words of Jesus we have part of the answer to certain problems that plague our society. William Barclay puts it this way:

"Every economic problem would be solved if men lived for what they could do for others and not for what they could get for themselves. Every political problem would be solved if the ambition of men was only to serve the state and not enhance their own prestige."

If these words of Jesus were taken seriously, that is lived out, by both unions and management in all our industries, and by our politicians in all levels of our political life; and by all citizens in our social life, what a difference it would make.

Then Jesus took a child and setting that child in their midst, said:

"who ever received one of these children in my name, receives me; and who ever receives me, receives not me, but the one who sent me."

Jesus often used a child to make a point in his teaching ministry. By so doing he disturbed the status quo. In those days children were anything but important. They had no rights. They had no status. They had no influence. They had no value. They were nobodies. And yet Jesus claimed that by receiving a child we would be receiving God.

Children in our western world have not been that important either. When arriving in a new community and seeking to make new friends we do not seek out the children first.

Until fairly recently parents could do as they pleased with their children. The children had no rights. There was no-one they could appeal to. The abuse of children in homes and in residential schools now being made known is incredible in a Christian society.



Of course Jesus was not saying that the only way to God is through a child. Children were an example of those who have no power. Jesus' suggestion is that to reach out in friendship to those who have no power and no influence is to receive God.

The disciples must have been feeling very uncomfortable by this time. So one of them, just like we would do in similar circumstances, tries to change the subject. He breaks in, saying, "By the way we stopped a man who was healing in your name because he was not one of us." But Jesus is not to be diverted so easily. He brings the discussion right back to the issue at hand by saying, "Do not stop him... For he who is not against us is on our side."

On another occasion he said, "But there are other sheep of mine not belonging to this fold whom I must bring in and they too will listen to my voice." (John 10:16)

This is a word all too often forgotten in the Church. Almost from the beginning the Christian community has been plagued by individuals who believe they are the sole interpreter of God's truth. All who do not agree with their particular version of the Truth are outside the pale. The road Jesus walked was one of inclusiveness. The God Jesus proclaimed was one who excluded no-one, as the hymn writer put it:

"There's a wideness in God's mercy like the wideness of the sea  
For the love of God is broader than the measure of men's minds."

As children of God we have been given the responsibility to think for ourselves. Truth is always bigger than our ability to grasp it. If God gave us minds with which to think, surely the tongues God gave us are to be used to speak.

But the freedom to think and to speak is a two-way street. If I want to enjoy that privilege then I must extend that privilege to everyone else. In the final analysis it will be by our fruit that it will be known whether we are Christ's disciples.

When we are committed to Christ, to be intolerant of another's opinion, to seek to browbeat another person into accepting our view, is to risk the loss of all. For if Christ lives in and through us, we will recognize that all who show the fruit of the Spirit's presence though they know not the name of Jesus, are, nevertheless, walking the same road with us.

But Jesus, well aware of the stumbling blocks in life, those things that get in the way of our being the person God is calling us to be, the pursuit of what the world understands by greatness being, Jesus said, "If your hand is your undoing cut it off." There is a need for singleness of mind. Nothing must be allowed to stand in the way of Christ living in and through us. The presence of some stumbling blocks calls for radical surgery.

That is not to say that everything that gets in the way of serving God is bad. Rather, what Jesus is saying is that all things cannot be given equal priority. As we have only so much time, some things may have to be cut out. We are aware of this in everyday life. A young man, accustomed to spending most of his free time with the boys, meets a girl and falls in love. They talk about

marriage and they share their expectations. Naturally the wife-to-be expects that her future husband will spend less time with the boys and more time with her. But is he willing to do this?

A mother wants her son to play hockey, but she would also like him to attend Sunday school and church. But the hockey coach says that if he misses practice he will be dropped from the team. One of the practice times is Sunday morning. For hockey we could substitute skiing, band practice, rehearsal for a musical, whatever it is that competes for the time we should give to worship, study, prayer and the service of God.

Jesus stated clearly time and time again that anything that comes between us and our commitment to him, between us and the service of the Kingdom, must be got rid of. This is not my opinion, nor is it my idea. Listen to Jesus:

“If a man puts his hand to the plough and looks back he is not fit for the kingdom. If a man loves father or mother more than me he is not worthy of me. If a man loves son or daughter more than me he is not worthy of me. If a man does not take up his cross and follow me he cannot be my disciple,”

Discipleship, as understood by Jesus, required a singlemindedness. The road to true greatness, according to Jesus, requires that all the stumbling blocks, all the obstacles, be removed, by surgery if necessary.

## B) THE GREATNESS THAT IS CRUCIFIXION

It was this single-mindedness of Jesus that led to his crucifixion. Some would prefer to say it was his stubbornness. He would allow nothing and no-one to deter him from the road God was calling him to walk – the road to Jerusalem, the road to the Cross.

This understanding of the historical Jesus is an offence to many. The way of the cross, the way he chose to walk, the way he calls his disciples to walk, is offensive because it is so different, so contrary to the ways of our society. For Jesus to walk this road required his letting go of all human securities, all other possibilities. He had to let go his economic securities and become one who had nowhere to lay his head. He had to let go his human securities, leaving behind his family and his carpenter's shop. He had to let go his political securities, “Put up your sword. He who lives by the sword dies by the sword.”

Like a lamb he was led away to the slaughter, “He was delivered into the hands of men,” powerless and completely vulnerable. They could do with him as they willed.

The term “delivered” implies, according to the commentators, that it was God who delivered him into the hands of men. This was the final act of faith. It is a similar faith we exercise when, having disciplined our child for staying out past their appointed curfew, we allow them to go out once again. What will they do?

Or is it similar to the faith a parent exercises when, having rescued the family kitten from their child who insisted on swinging it by the tail, you allow your child to play with the kitten again.

It is a similar faith exercised by the parole board when it releases a rapist, child molester, murderer, or thief, believing that they have been rehabilitated.

In any act of faith there is always risk. But there is no rehabilitation, there is no reconciliation, there is no love, without risk. The greatness of the Cross is in fact that God believed so much in the power of unconditional love, the power of unconditional goodness, in the power of vicarious suffering, in the way of self-giving, that God delivered his son Jesus into the hands of men and allowed them to have their way with him.

Does the fact that men chose to crucify Jesus, and that we continue to crucify Jesus, simply demonstrate the depravity of man?

I believe that what God revealed in and through the Cross is still valid. That to walk the road Jesus walked, to see crucifixion, death, the pouring out of one's life on behalf of others, as the road to true greatness, is only possible when we do as Jesus did. We have to let go all our human securities and let God take over our lives. The reality is, whether we realize it or not, we are completely held in the hollow of God's hands.

There is nothing in all creation that can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. All that is required is the acceptance of that reality, and the grasping with firmer hand the One who feeds and sustains us in life. For the God who has come to us in Jesus our Christ will never let us go beyond his love and care.

## CONCLUSION

This was the message Jesus had to impress upon the minds and hearts of his first disciples as they travelled towards Jerusalem. As they struggled with this message, so must we. This road to Jerusalem, this way of the Cross, is a call to live powerfully but not violently; to live willingly a life of daily transformation for, as we are transformed, the world will be transformed again.

With the establishment of the Church under Emperor Constantine, the mission and message, the way of the Cross, was derailed. I suppose they thought that the victory was won. Christ was now ruler of the world. But in reality the Church gave her blessing to military power, and history records the rise and fall of empires, and the battle among Christians for power in the world. Then, with the rise of the industrial revolution, the Church gave her blessing to economic power which has led us deeper and deeper into the quicksands of debt, with the ever-present threat of the collapse of our economic house of cards.

In the process of blessing political, military, economic and theological imperialism, the Christian Church has failed to bring peace and reconciliation to the human family. Rather there is

confrontation of power with power, the destabilization of races and nations, starvation and disease, the destruction of the environment and the enslavement of peoples.

Lent, the road to Jerusalem, reminds us that there has always been an alternative way, the way of the Cross.

While the Cross outside the city walls was, in one sense, Jesus hitting bottom – for he was alone. All forsook him and fled. It was also a new beginning which enabled those first disciples to turn the ancient world right side up, something that needs repeating. But who among us is willing to walk with this Jesus towards Jerusalem, that we too may learn how to be part of a people whom God well empower to turn this world, this beautiful world God has given us, right side up once more?

### (III) THE NEEDLE'S EYE

TEXT:

*"It is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the Kingdom of God."*

Mark 10:25

#### INTRODUCTION

As Jesus was travelling towards Jerusalem a stranger knelt at his feet and asked the question, "What must I do to win eternal life?"

As the story unfolds we discover that this stranger was a man who has spent a lifetime keeping the commandments. Despite this fact he still felt he was missing something. There was an emptiness in his life. His religious observance of the law had not met his need. He was still seeking Eternal life. He had not experienced that quality of life which comes from life lived in fellowship with God

Mark draws for us the picture of a highly respectable citizen, a deeply religious man, a keeper of the law, one whom others could look up to as an example of good religious living. He had harmed no-one.

But had he done any good? With all his wealth, what had he done for the less fortunate? Had he gone out of his way to help, to comfort, and to strengthen others?

Keeping the law, being religious, being respectable, appears to have been seen as a way of life that consisted in not doing certain things – not worshipping any graven image, not stealing, not committing murder, not committing adultery, not coveting, doing no work on the Sabbath day. But Jesus also saw in the man who knelt before him someone with great potential. His heart, we are told, warmed towards him.

But then Jesus, as he so often did, went right to the heart of this man's problem by saying, "One thing you lack, go sell everything you have, and give to the poor, and you will have riches in heaven; and come follow me." Jesus challenged him to let go his trust in obedience to the law which had given him his religious respectability, and to take his life, his possessions, and to pour himself out on behalf of others. Only then would he find Eternal Life, experience life lived in fellowship with God.

Mark goes on to tell us that the man turned away with a heavy heart. Apparently the price was too high. There was a limit beyond which this man was not prepared to go. In the light of this confrontation Jesus said, "It is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the Kingdom of God."

Once again, Jesus was turning an accepted understanding of life upside down. Prosperity, wealth, material riches, had always been seen as a sign of God's blessing. If you obeyed God's laws, if you fulfilled the requirement of the law, then it was God's duty to reward you with an abundance of material good things.

Even the disciples must have been surprised at Jesus' treatment of this stranger. After all, he was a good prospect, one who could have contributed to that little band both personally and financially. They would have welcomed him with open arms. But Jesus does not make it easy for him. He does not soften his demands. He lets him walk away.

Ever since the Christian faith was accepted by Emperor Constantine, the Christian Community has been tempted to lower the standards for discipleship in an attempt to draw the multitude in. The Church has often been the dispenser of cheap grace, removing the challenge of discipleship. The result has been large numbers of names on Church rolls who expect all the privileges of membership but who contribute neither their time nor their money, nor anything of themselves to the worship, the service or the mission of God.

But Jesus never lowered his demands. He always presented discipleship as a challenge which demanded a person's best.

#### A) THE DEMAND OF JESUS

But what is it that Jesus demands of his disciples? What does this story tell us?

There have been those who have seen this story as teaching that Jesus was totally opposed to wealth. Therefore, to be a disciple involved the selling of everything and the giving away of all one's material possessions.

In the 3<sup>rd</sup> century Anthony of Thebes believed this to be the correct interpretation and so he abandoned all his possessions and lived the life of a hermit in the Egyptian desert. Francis of Assisi was also moved by this story and left his wealthy home to set up an order of travelling Friars for whom poverty was an essential rule. But what did Jesus actually say?

While all versions of the Bible don't include it, there are some versions that have the words, "How hard it is for those WHO TRUST IN RICHES to enter the Kingdom of God." If this is the original saying, then what Jesus is saying is that wealth in and of itself is not the problem, but the trusting in riches rather than trust in God.

The man who knelt before Jesus on the road to Jerusalem was possessed by his possessions. He could not envision life without his possessions. This gives to material things an importance they do not deserve. It also leads to an approach to life which says everyone has their price. Every issue, every problem every crisis is seen in terms of dollars and cents. It is an attitude that has overlooked the fact that the best things in life cannot be bought – friendship, caring, unconditional love, life itself. When things, when riches become the be-all and end-all of life, there is no room for God.

But can anyone be truly free from their possessions? The disciples sensed the impossibility of such a demand and so ask the question, "Who can be saved?" This was what the stranger was looking for – life in harmony with God, wholeness of life Salvation, Eternal Life. It was what the disciples were looking for. It is what we are looking for. It is the answer to that emptiness when we discover that, despite all the things we possess, there is no lasting satisfaction.

And Jesus replies, "For man it is impossible, but not for God; everything is possible for God." In other words, Jesus is saying that if we are serious about the search for wholeness, Eternal Life, than asking what we must do is the wrong question. There is nothing we can do. Eternal Life does not come to us as a result of wealth or good works.

In Corinthians 13, Paul writes,

"I may speak in tongues of men or of angels, but if I am without love, I am a sounding gong or a clanging cymbal.

I may have the gift of prophecy and know every hidden truth, I may have faith strong enough to move mountains; but if I have not love, I am nothing.

I may dole out all my possessions, or even give my body to be burnt, but if I have no love I am none the better."

Love is the one essential ingredient for wholeness of life, Eternal Life, life with God now and forever. We are able to love because God first loved us. It is a gift from God. Eternal life, salvation, being at one with God now and forever, is also God's gift that requires only our acceptance of faith.

## B) THE TRUTH FOR US

As we listen to this ancient story, as we recognize that, in relationship to most people in the world, we are rich – even the poorest among us – and if we too seek Eternal Life, life with God, there are two questions we need to think about.

Firstly, is there anything that stands between me and God, between me and that perfect relationship with God, between me and the Eternal Life that I seek? When we come to Jesus because we are not satisfied with life the way we are experiencing it, because we are not experiencing life in its fullness, because there is something missing in our lives, he confronts us with those same words, "One thing you lack." For each it can be something different, for no

two of us are the same. Before Jesus we are each a unique individual, with our own unique blocks.

When Nicodemus, who was also a wealthy man, came to Jesus he was not asked to give away his possessions, but to be born again. Matthew Levi, a tax collector, also a man of wealth, simply left his tax collecting. Zacchaeus, we are told, refunded those whom he had defrauded and gave half his money to the poor, but did not become a disciple. Peter, Andrew, James and John left their nets and boats, but they still possessed them, because they were able to return to them after the crucifixion.

Each was treated as an individual. Jesus does not force every individual through the same mold, nevertheless the question for us remains. What prevents us from following Christ the way we feel we should? What prevents us from experiencing oneness with God in Christ? What prevents us from experiencing the fullness of life in the kingdom?

Let's translate those questions, those concepts, into everyday practical terms. When God in Christ asks us to do something – help a stranger, feed the hungry, chair a committee, lead a Sunday school class, get involved in the peace issue, do something about arms control, low income housing, unemployment, abortion, visit the sick, befriend someone in prison, spend more time in prayer and meditation, increase our financial contribution to the Church – what do we say? What excuses do we make for not becoming involved in the life and work of Christ's church, in the mission of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ?

What do we say when we hear God in Christ suggesting that we should give and not count the cost, we should turn the other cheek, go the second mile, we should love our enemies? What is our response when God in Christ asks us to think only of what we can do for others, and not what's in it for ourselves?

We need to look at the question of Eternal Life in these practical terms because in this passage, as well as in others, Jesus is really saying that the maintenance of our life with God rests on our response to the demands of God, the life God in Christ is calling us to live.

Eternal life is a gift, but it is a gift which takes root in our lives and grows as we respond to his call to love and serve others. It is a gift, the reception of which can be blocked by those things we allow to come between us and God.

Secondly, we need to think about our relationship to the material things of this world. If we are not to trust in riches, what ought our relationship to be?

Jesus told the parable of the farmer who tore down his barns to build bigger ones. Jesus does not criticize him for his productivity or his prosperity. Jesus criticized him because it was the farmer's intention to keep his wealth for himself, seeing it as securing his future. That is, he put his trust, his faith in his wealth rather than in God.



In the parable of the Talents, those who used their talents to make more talents, those who were productive, were rewarded with greater responsibility. Those who did nothing with what had been entrusted to them were condemned. Jesus never condemns wealth, possessions, as being bad in themselves. His teaching is about the use people put them to. That is, the proper relationship we should take to wealth, to possessions. His call is for responsible stewardship of all that God has given. Jesus recognizes that wealth, all material things come from God, not as a reward for good behavior, for God sends the rain and the sunshine on the just and the unjust alike. God provides his gifts without favouritism. Jesus upholds the Biblical view that all things belong to God and are entrusted to all people for the benefit of all. When we accept the fact that our security is in God and not in the things we possess, if we trust in God and not in the things we possess, then we are free to be good stewards of all God's gifts.

### CONCLUSION

When Jesus used the illustration of the eye of the needle, how his hearers must have chuckled. Can you picture a camel trying to get through the eye of a needle? On another occasion Jesus drew the picture of a man with a log in his own eye trying to take a speck out of his brother's eye. What a joke! How impossible!

But we keep trying. So quick to criticize what another has done, so slow to acknowledge where we have fallen short. So quick to buy insurance, so diligent in saving, so frugal in our giving. We Canadians, so they say, are or were the greatest savers in the world. So quick to support another war because our leaders tell us it is to save democracy.

Why do we put so much stock in owning our own homes, putting large amounts of money into safe investments? Why do we insist on imposing our national interest on the Iraqis, Iranians, Afghans which, according to Mulroney, is why our troops were sent to the Persian Gulf, not the defense of freedom as we were first told. In what do we trust?

If we lost everything would we still believe in a God of unconditional love? Let us thank God for those of this world who love their God with all their heart and with all their mind and all their resources, and never seek any reward save that of knowing that they have done their best to make life a little pleasanter for someone else. They are the ones, Jesus says, who will inherit the Kingdom of God and will enjoy eternal life, life with God, now and for ever.



## (IV) ARE YOU ABLE?

### TEXT:

*"Can you drink the cup that I drink or be baptized with the baptism I am baptized with?"*

*"We can," they answered.*

Mark 10:38

### INTRODUCTION

Recently I watched part of the movie *The Dove* which is the true story of Robin Graham's single-handed sail around the world. He was only sixteen when he set out. Such a journey, such a dream is not shared by everybody. Some of us read the accounts of another's journey avidly. We may even dare to dream that some day we might even try such a journey. But few of us start out yet alone complete it. Why? We hold back because, as the years go by, we are more aware of the dangers and we are not as quick to risk our lives on such a journey.

There were times when Robin Graham wondered why he had ever started out. There were moments he wanted to quit. I suspect if he had known of all the hair-raising battles with the elements he was to face he might never have started out. But with any such dream the thing that gets us started, despite all the stories about the dangers, is the belief that these things happen to others, not to us.

This is also true of our journey through life. When we are young we don't think a great deal about the possible crises that lie ahead for us. We press forward with the blind courage of youth, with unlimited self-confidence, with a sense of being invulnerable to the slings and arrows of misfortune. We are blind to the signs of danger. We tune out those who warn us of the rocks and pitfalls in our path. Like the rushing mountain stream in full flood, we think we can carry all before us.

And so it was that, as Jesus journeyed towards Jerusalem with his disciples, having tried to prepare them for the confrontation with the power of Israel and the power of Rome that lay ahead, two of them, James and John, nicknamed Sons of Thunder, ask an inappropriate favour. They ask for the seats of power in the kingdom which was to come. They wanted to sit, one on the right and the other on the left of Jesus, in his kingdom. That's rather like the office boy asking to be made a vice president after his first week on the job, or a rookie MP asking to be Minister of Finance in his first week in the House. It is the supreme confidence of youth.

While such confidence does exist in the business world, in the political world and in the community, it is not often seen in the Church today. We don't usually have an election for chairperson of the Official Board or for any of the committees. It's true that with positions such as these there comes added responsibility, extra work, extra commitment. There is depth of involvement. There is also criticism and not always a great deal of thanks. Nor is there a great deal of power for the individual in our conciliar system. But Jesus had not organized his followers in a conciliar system. He was their Lord and Master. Therefore, in the kingdom of such a Lord and Master, power was centralized.

James and John were young, impetuous, ambitious, overflowing with self-confidence. They had been included on several occasions in the inner circle, sharing with Jesus some of the high moments of his ministry. Jesus does not dismiss their request out of hand. Instead he reminds them, and all who would follow him, of the necessity to be able to share the totality of his experience. The right to share his power, however, was not his to give.

#### A) THE CUP

Jesus asks James and John, "Can you drink from the cup that I drink..." Here we have the first of two Jewish metaphors. The cup was a metaphor for the life and experience that God hands out to his children.

"My cup runneth over..." said the Psalmist when he spoke of a life and experience of happiness given to him by God. Isaiah, thinking of the disaster that had come upon the people of Israel, describes them as having drunk, "at the hand of the lord the cup of His fury." (Isaiah 51:17)

What was the cup, the life experience, that Jesus had to drink? He had been called to leave the comfort of his home and family, to become one who had nowhere to lay his head. He was called to walk a path that would lead to rejection by his hometown, by his family, and even for a while by those who followed him. He was asked to walk a path that would set him in opposition to the religious and the civil authorities. He was called to take an attitude to life and the social conditions of the day that would bring him into confrontation with the establishment of the day. He was called to stand before Pilate, silent; to take the abuse of the soldiers, the mockery of the crowd, and to suffer the final indignity, to die on a cross between two thieves, the death of a social outcast.

Tradition tells us that James was martyred and possibly John too. Eventually they were able to drink the cup, accept the life experience God had for them. But what does it mean for us? What is the cup we are called to drink?

We are not being called to experience stoning as Stephen did for his faith. Nor are we likely to be imprisoned or beaten as Paul was. Neither are we going to have to face the lions or the gladiators as many early Christians did. There are those in our world, Christian brothers and sisters who are being imprisoned, tortured and put to death because of their faith, because of

what God in Christ is calling them to be and to do. Stories are coming out of the Philippines of Christian pastors and lay people who are being killed. The same thing is happening in Central America.

While we live in different circumstances from them, nevertheless each one of us has our own particular life experience that God has given us to live. The pain we bear may have a different cause, but it is still real pain. There is the pain of loneliness, there is the pain or rejection that comes when a marriage breaks up, the pain we suffer when our child is in trouble. The pain of unemployment, of feeling useless, unwanted, cast aside by society. There is the pain of sickness. The pain of watching someone we love suffer. The pain we feel as we see this beautiful world God has given us being slowly destroyed.

There is so much pain in our world today. Children starving to death. The thousands of casualties in the Persian Gulf war, the war in Ethiopia, the ongoing confrontations in the Russian republics, just to name a few spots. When we add to that the violence on our city streets, the children and families suffering all manner of abuse, our inclination is to bury our heads in the sand and ignore it all. While to ignore it all, to turn off the pictures, may lessen our feelings of guilt, is it what God wants us to do? Are we able to drink the cup, the life and experience God has given us in our day?

## B) HIS BAPTISM

The second Jewish metaphor that Jesus uses is the term "baptized". He says, "...or be baptized with the baptism I am baptized with?" He was not referring to his experience at the hands of John the Baptist at the river Jordan. Jesus was using the term in its sense of being submerged in an experience. A spendthrift was said to be submerged in debt, a drunk submerged in drink, a grief-stricken person submerged in sorrow. Jesus was asking them if they were able to be immersed in the sort of experiences he was called to be immersed in – hatred, pain and death. Were they able to live their lives in perpetual challenge of those powers in the world that were in opposition to God and God's will for the world?

Jesus could have remained safe and secure by concentrating his ministry in Galilee and the regions to the north. He would have been quite safe if he had kept his teaching to the safe topics of the beauty of the world God had created, the beauty of the lilies and the birds of the trees. But Jesus chose to challenge the lifestyle of the rich and famous of his day. He challenged the dishonesty of the Temple activities. He challenged the superficiality of much of the traditional religious practice of the day. He challenged the failure to love God with all one's heart, soul and being and one's neighbor as one's self.

James and John were so sure that they could do what was asked of them. They had their time of weakness when faced with the reality of Jesus' arrest, trial and death. But in time they were empowered, enabled to totally immerse themselves in the proclamation by word and deed of the Good News of Jesus Christ.

But what might this mean for us - to be baptized with the baptism with which Christ was baptized? None of us knows for sure when we begin our journey through life with Christ what experiences are in store for us. No two of us will have exactly the same experiences. We are not all asked to do the same things. I have always believed that belief and action go together. What we do reflects what we believe and what we believe is reflected in what we do. What we do today prepares us for the challenges of tomorrow. It is for the best that we only know the present and not the future.

Let me illustrate first from my own experience, having experienced occupation by a foreign power during the Second World War and having discovered that Germans were no different from Englishmen. People are people. Within every race or nationality there are good and bad. I have become aware that wars have never solved the human problems that are the cause of wars. When I add to my experience the fact that Jesus taught us that we are to love everyone, even our enemies, I can do no other than oppose war, whether I be in Vietnam, Central America, or the Persian Gulf.

I believe Jesus taught the need for reconciliation in all areas of life, and so I have always had an interest and some involvement in seeking the improvement of Industrial Relations through Church and Industry Institutes, Industrial Missions and Social Ministry. Jesus ministered to the poor, the powerless, which led me to be involved in a drop-in centre in skid row in one city and a concern for low income housing. I have never been physically stoned for my activities, or beaten with rods, but I know there have been times when the powers that be both in congregations and community have been anything but pleased.

Then I think of an individual who, out of his concern for the environment, was responsible for his company being fined for their irresponsible polluting of a stream in their area. He has never been able to work in that type of industry again. I think of someone who worked in the airplane industry and who discovered that the so-called training planes they were assembling for a South American country were to be fitted with bomb sights. Fortunately for him, the Union stood together. The bomb sights were not fitted in Canada.

What ought we to do about the sale of Nuclear Power Stations to third world countries? Is it any of our business whether they are then able to produce nuclear weapons? What will we do about the sale of arms to middle east countries? What will we do about the growing problems of our cities – drugs traffic, crimes of violence, much of which is caused by poverty and lack of hope of any improvement in the foreseeable future?

What happens when we become involved in such issues? What happens when we oppose those forces in our society that seek to destroy life as God intended us to live it? What happens when Christians oppose those forces that proclaim a self-centred lifestyle, personally and nationally? What happens when Christians urge a more equitable sharing of the national resources? What happens when Christians call upon our government to withdraw our troops from a fighting role in order to preserve our role as peace-keeper in the world?

In our lifetime I don't expect any of us will be called upon to experience what Jesus did. While we may be brought before the authorities if we engage in civil disobedience, we may even be jailed, but we are not likely to be physically beaten, stoned or nailed to a cross. Nevertheless, being called names can hurt, losing friends can hurt. Our children can suffer because of the stands we take in the community or church.

When we are young, in that first glow of faith, we don't think too far ahead. Jesus, faced with the enthusiasm of James and John, asked the all-important question, "Are you able...?"

They were so sure, replying as with one voice, "We are able..."

### CONCLUSION

Are we able? Am I able?

None of us knows for sure what we would do if faced with real opposition. How many of us would still attend Church if by so doing you could be arrested, lose your citizenship? How many of us would read our Bibles, or say our prayers, if it were a criminal offence? How many of us would dare to oppose any government proposal from GST, Free Trade, new abortion laws, to involvement in war, if such acts were deemed treason, punishable by death?

Most of us have difficulty sticking to the routine activities of the Christian life, day in and day out, expressing our loyalty, our commitment to Christ by being present, by making the phone calls, by making that visit, by giving a helping hand even when the recipient does not make us feel welcome. Most of us are unprepared for the demands that completely upset our life and call for a radical re-arrangement of our cozy world. The sort of demand that set Abraham on a road to a new land.

None of us knows for sure what lies ahead or whether we will be able to cope with all the experiences God has in store for us.

But I have discovered that we are enabled to do more than we ever dreamed was possible by the power of God. I have discovered the truth in these words of Paul to the Galatians, "It is no longer I that live, but Christ who lives in me." (Galatians 2:20)

We are enabled, as we seek to walk where God in Christ leads us daily. We are enabled, as we are open to the influence of the Spirit daily. For when the crises of life come, when we have to face opposition, when we have to face those who seek to persuade us to follow the easy road rather than the Christ road, we discover that God in Christ is beside us, enabling us to live our lives on a daily basis, leading us through each and every crisis, even carrying us when the road becomes too difficult.

We are not committed to move mountains, to change the world or bring in God's kingdom single-handedly, but simply to walk with God, seeking to be obedient followers of our Lord and Master day by day.



## (V) HE CURSED A FIG TREE

### TEXT:

*"He said to the tree;*

*'May no-one ever again eat fruit from you.'*

*Rabbi, look, for the fig tree which you cursed has withered"*

Mark 11:14-22

### INTRODUCTION

Jesus is facing the last week of his life and ministry. The countdown has begun. The moments and the hours are ticking away relentlessly.

As Jesus considers his options there seems no way to escape the inevitable conclusion. True, yesterday had been a day of triumph. How the crowds had cheered as he had entered the city. He had savoured the day, drinking in the sights and the sounds, knowing the fickleness of a crowd.

Today, as he approaches the city, he knows he must act. The temple must be cleansed. The merchants and money changers removed. This would be a clear challenge to the Establishment in the very citadel of their power. The repercussions would be widespread. There would be retaliation. But he must do what he must do.

As I look back on those events I wonder what his feelings were that morning as he crested the hill overlooking the Holy City? As I try to stand in his shoes, knowing what I am about to do, suspecting the response of the authorities, concerned about the loyalty of my followers, I know I would be somewhat agitated to put it mildly. The adrenalin would be flowing, my blood pressure rising. It would be difficult to respond objectively to any situation, no matter how seemingly trivial. Perhaps, as he paused to draw breath and take in the view, he remembered that he had not eaten as good a breakfast that morning as he should have done. He sees a fig tree, and he has a fig attack, just as we might have a Mac attack at the sight of the Golden Arches.

But there were no figs on the tree because it was not the season. His reaction seems completely uncalled for:

*"May no one ever again eat fruit from you."*

### A) THE DIFFICULTIES

This is one of the most difficult sayings in the New Testament. Was it simply a muttered expression not intended for the ears of his disciples? A muttered expression of exasperation? In other words, a very human response such as we might make if, suffering from a sudden craving, we were to go to the frig or the store and find that for which we crave was unobtainable. We might utter a four-letter word, that is a curse.

The saying is difficult because it is so out of character. If it is literally true, it raises questions about the common sense of Jesus. To expect fruit out of season is unnatural. Why curse a fig tree for failing to do what by nature is impossible?

To see this incident as simply the proof of Jesus' supernatural power, only increases the difficulty. For while Jesus did a number of things that may be beyond our human understanding at the moment, he refused to do wonders that enhanced his personal comfort. He refused to turn stones into bread to satisfy his own hunger, though he fed the 5,000 with five barley loaves and two fish. His powers were always used to help others in such a way that God's love for all His children was made visible. To curse a fig tree benefitted no-one. To claim that Jesus, because of his unsatisfied hunger, should curse and destroy a tree for simply being its natural self, would present an unexpected and frightening side to his character. It would look like a star's temper tantrum.

Commentators have struggled with this story trying to find an explanation that puts Jesus in a better light. Some have suggested that the fault lay with the tree. It should have had fruit. It should have had a few figs either left over from the previous season, or a few ripening early from the current season. Others have suggested that it should have had some buds that would be edible and they even suggest that such buds were considered a delicacy by local gourmets. But those who live in the region and who have observed fig trees all year round report that there are neither winter leaves nor winter figs. Young figs and new leaves appear together in the spring, the buds being tasteless and inedible. There is no way around Mark's simple statement that there were no figs because it was not the season.

Some commentators have tried to get around the difficulty by seeing this story as an abridged version of the parable Jesus told of the orchard owner who wanted to cut down a fruitless fig tree and was persuaded by a servant to spare it for one more year. But Mark's gospel is believed to have been the first one written and the basis of the others. Therefore, it is more likely that Mark is presenting the whole story and that he has a good reason for doing so.

The events of the last week of Jesus' life, as recorded for us by Mark, appear to have been carefully planned. There was the pre-arrangement for a donkey to be available for Jesus' entry into the city. There was the arrangement for the Upper Room, a man carrying a water pot, completely unheard of in that day. The events of this last week were not left to chance. Jesus

had planned each step of the way. He was in charge. He was no victim being swept along by unexpected events.

## B) AN INTERPRETATION

If this be so, and if this was a deliberate act of Jesus, could it have been intended as an acted parable? The Old Testament prophets, especially Jeremiah, were fond of acted parables.

Our Old Testament reading this morning gave us the account of one such parable. Jeremiah was told by God to buy a linen girdle and put it around his waist. It was not to be touched by water. Then he was told to hide the girdle in a crevice in the rock. After some time he was told to retrieve it. He found it spoiled and good for nothing. Then what had happened to the girdle was applied to Judah. On another occasion he was ordered to buy an earthenware jar and after pronouncing the shattering of Judah, he was to shatter the jar before the eyes of the people.

Therefore, if this incident is in reality an acted parable following the example of Jeremiah, it has nothing to do with either the character or the common sense of Jesus. His action was intended to convey a truth. What then is the truth contained in this acted parable?

Just as a fruit tree in leaf indicates life and the potential for fruit, so the nation Israel gave the appearance of life and health and the potential for bearing fruit. That is to say, the synagogues were crowded in the towns and villages throughout the countryside. The ordinary people had flocked to hear John the Baptist and be baptized in the Jordan. As Jesus had criss-crossed the countryside, large crowds had hung on his every word. Now Jerusalem was filling fast with thousands of pilgrims ready to celebrate the great Passover feast.

Here were all the signs of a people of God very much alive. But there was no fruit on the fig tree because it was the wrong season. But for Israel, Messiah had come, harvest time had come. They had had years of preparation. The nation had flowered under David and Solomon. The tree had been nurtured and sustained by the prophets. The tree should have been ready to bear mature fruit. Jesus, when visiting the Samaritan village of Sychar, said, "The fields are white unto harvest.." But now in these final days Jesus knew that those who yesterday had cheered would shortly cry, "Crucify!" He knew that the religious leaders had been plotting his death almost from the beginning of his ministry. John wrote years later, "He entered his own realm, and his own would not receive him." (John 1:11)

Jesus, the Messiah, had come to gather the fruit, but there was none. So in this acted parable Jesus condemns promise without fulfillment.

So this action of Jesus speaks to every age including our own. Vows are made at a baptismal service, at a confirmation service, after a deeply moving spiritual experience, or in the depth of a deep life crisis when we despair of ever seeing the light again. But the moment passes and we

slip back into the old familiar ways, letting the opportunity to produce the fruit of a life committed to God in Christ slip away.

Jesus, by this action, condemned profession without practice. Jesus said,:

“Beware of false prophets, men who are dressed up as sheep while underneath they are savage wolves. You will recognize them by the fruit they bear. Can grapes be picked from briars or figs from thistles?

In the same way a good tree always yields good fruit and a poor tree bad fruit.

And when a tree does not bear good fruit it is cut down and burnt.”

(Matthew 7:15-17)

While a hymn writer put it this way, “They will know we are Christians by our love.” That is to say, it is not sufficient to say, “Jesus is Lord”. It is not sufficient to be able to recite the historic creeds of the Church. It is not sufficient to appear to be religious. It is by our deeds as well as our words that we show whether we are disciples of Jesus our Christ, whether we are committed to walking in His Way.

But did Jesus mean this acted parable to be applied to the Israel of his day? George McLeod, founder of the Iona Community in Scotland, has an interesting thought. He writes:

“The story of the fig tree is an immoral story. Jesus’ demand that the tree bear fruit out of season is an immoral demand. It is absolutely immoral unless – unless the fig tree is the New Israel!! If so, that changes matters. The New Israel must always be ready to bear fruit out of season. That is its vocation.”

This point of view fits a great deal of the teaching of Jesus which so often implies, and sometimes demands, that His followers go much further than either the law or human nature requires.

In the sayings collected under the theme of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus declares that while the law forbade murder, being angry with one’s brother would be punished equally severely. Again, the law forbade adultery. But Jesus declared that to look lustfully on a woman was to commit adultery with her in the heart.

While in the past they had been taught to love their neighbor but hate their enemy, Jesus declared that they were to love their enemy and pray for their persecutors. He said,

“If you love only those who love you, what reward can you expect? Surely tax gatherers do as much as that. And if you greet only your brother, what is there extraordinary about that? Even the heathen do as much. There must be no limit to your goodness as your heavenly Father’s goodness knows no bounds.”

(Matthew 5:47-48)

While it may be normal to forgive a friend once or twice, Jesus proposes unlimited forgiveness. He spoke of going the second mile, turning the other cheek, giving not only your cloak but also

your coat to the one in need. This same pattern can be seen in his teaching concerning the Kingdom of God.

There were many aspects of life in the kingdom which were beyond the normal expectations of life in community. The New Israel, those who followed Jesus, those who commit themselves to being part of the Body of Christ in each and every generation, were expected to produce fruit out of season as well as in season. That is, to do the unexpected kindness, to love unconditionally, to pour out one's life as Jesus poured out his life.

## CONCLUSION

As Jesus faced his last days with the inevitability of the cross looming ever more clearly before him, the question that hung over him like a black cloud was, "Would those whom he had called, would those who had been with him, fulfill his expectations?"

I am sure his greatest fear was that the promise they appeared to hold would be nipped in the bud, and the mission he has sought to establish would wither and die like the fig tree. It is a very human fear. We can spend a piece of our life trying to establish a dream, trying to impart an understanding of life, trying to teach a set of values, trying to impart a certain attitude to life, hoping that what we have done will have some lasting value, that our having lived among a group of people will make a difference in the lives of those people. Then comes the moment of truth when, for whatever reason, we are no longer involved. Will our efforts go for nought? Will the vision, the dream we sought to nurture, live or die? We do not know ahead of time. Neither did Jesus.

Jesus placed his life, all that he had said and done, in the hands of God and the future was left for God to determine. The call then and now is simply to be faithful to the vision of the Kingdom we have been given and to leave the future in God's hands, but remembering that individually and collectively, the failure to produce fruit results in the withering of life, both for the individual and for a congregation. Therefore, may we so live that all who meet us along life's way will know that we are Christ's followers by our love.



## (VI) HE CLEANSED THE TEMPLE

### TEXT:

*"He went into the temple and began driving out those who bought and sold in the Temple?"*

Mark 11:15

### INTRODUCTION

Jesus had spent the night at Bethany. There with Martha, Mary and Lazarus, he had enjoyed a quiet evening. It was the calm before the storm. Now as he approached the Holy City he crested the shoulder of the Mount of Olives and saw once again that unforgettable sight.

Herod, in spite of his ruthlessness with those whom he thought threatened his hold on power, had left his mark on the city. He had built palaces, citadels, a theatre, an amphitheatre, viaducts and public monuments. He had spared no expense. But the one building that dominated the whole city was the Temple. It was the city's crowning jewel.

It covered 35 acres of the highest land in the city. The roof of the sanctuary rose to a height of 165 feet. It was said that there was so much gold covering the building that no-one could look directly at it in bright sunlight. The area was surrounded by a massive retaining wall constructed of blocks of stone from 15 to 30 feet long and 13 feet thick. It was one of the finest Temples in the world. But most important of all, it was the focal point of Jewish faith and life. To attend one of the great festivals was the goal of every male Jew, no matter where he lived in the world.

As Jesus rounded the shoulder of the Mount of Olives, the city and the Temple, the religious centre of his people, lay before him in all its splendour and from every direction came pilgrims in their thousands to celebrate the feast of the Passover.

### A) A SIGN

Jesus had been there many times before. He was familiar with every nook and cranny of the Temple and its various courts. He had passed through the court of the Gentiles, the court of Women and into the court of the Israelites. There he had watched the priests perform the sacred rituals before the altar which stood in front of the main sanctuary, the Holy of Holies, the very House of God.

The various activities that took place in the Temple Courts were familiar. He had seen the selling of sacrificial animals and birds. He had seen the changing of foreign money in order to pay the Temple tax. He had observed the excessive profits being made by over-pricing of the birds and animals, and the high exchange rate. These were activities that no doubt were discussed by the people away from the Temple. None of this was a recent innovation. Why then did Jesus choose to make his stand on this issue at this moment?

There is some uncertainty as to when this actually took place. John, in his gospel, places it at the beginning of Jesus' ministry, while Matthew, Mark and Luke place it during the last week of Jesus' life. Each had their own reasons, depending upon when they believed Jesus chose to reveal clearly his true identity. For the cleansing of the Temple was a sign, a method of connecting the life and activity of Jesus to events foretold by some of the Old Testament prophets of the One who was to come.

We see this method used in the telling of the story regarding the birth of Jesus. Matthew, having shared with us the unusualness of Mary's pregnancy, goes on to say, "All this happened in order to fulfill what the Lord declared through the prophets." Later, when we are told of Mary and Joseph's flight into Egypt to save Jesus from Herod, Matthew goes on to say, "This was to fulfill what the Lord had declared through the prophets, I called my son out of Egypt."

Then, as we study the suffering servant passages of the Prophet Isaiah, we see some startling similarities between the prophet's description of the servant and the life of Jesus. It appears as though Jesus modelled his life to some extent on the suffering servant of Isaiah. Signs, parables, acted parables used by the Old Testament prophets and by Jesus are all intended to point us to truth, often connecting old truth with new truth.

Jesus was a man of his times. He was deeply conscious of his roots. His thinking had been moulded by the Old Testament prophets. He deliberately chose to enter Jerusalem. Zechariah had said long before, "Rejoice, rejoice daughter of Zion. Shout aloud, daughter of Jerusalem, for see, your King is coming to you, his cause is won, his victory gained, humble and mounted on an ass, on a foal, the young of a she-ass." Here was a deliberate sign revealing that he was the victorious Messiah coming in peace.

Last Sunday we looked at the cursing of the fig tree as an acted parable, expressing God's disappointment at the failure of the people of God to produce fruit. So, too, the cleansing of the Temple can be seen as an acted parable. His actions recalled the words of the prophet Malachi who had written long before, "Suddenly the Lord whom you seek will come to His Temple, who can endure the day of His coming, who can stand firm when He appears. He is like a refiner's fire, like fullers soap. He will take his seat refining and purifying." (Malachi 3:2-3)

And so Jesus drove out those who bought and sold, overturning the tables of money changers.



## B) AN ACT OF CONFRONTATION

The cleansing of the Temple was also a deliberate act of confrontation with the religious establishment of the day. He hit them where it hurt most, in their pocketbook. No-one who holds power either then or now takes kindly to such a confrontation. It was a one-man protest against the secularization and the commercialization of the house of prayer.

I wonder what God thinks of the electronic church of our day? Jesus confronted those who had made a business out of religion. He protested against those who saw religion as an appendage to business and commerce. It was a protest against the lack of concern for the mission entrusted to them, "to be a light to the gentiles".

Dennis and Matthew Lynn, in their book *Healing life's hurts*, write "When people are hurt by greedy temple sellers, demons, hypocritical pharisees, unbelievers, or wicked masters, Christ's anger blazes hope forth. Christ doesn't just silently withdraw, swallow his anger and hope injustice will disappear. Anger drives him to correct injustice quickly even before night falls.

Jesus, by his very nature, because of his love for people, because of his love for God and God's justice, was driven to this confrontation. When anyone puts into practice the good news that Jesus taught and lived, they too are bound to confront the principalities and powers, the current rulers of our economic, political and religious life.

Two thousand years ago God in Christ confronted the religious establishment in Jerusalem. He cleansed the temple, the centre of their life and faith. Where is God in Christ confronting us today? Where is God in Christ confronting us as a Church, as a Congregation, as a nation, as individual Christians? Where are the inconsistencies in our own life of faith?

The Church is faced with a variety of issues today. There are issues around immigration policies, native rights, the rights of minorities, French/English relations, religious education in the schools, the involvement of military forces from developed nations in the internal affairs of undeveloped nations, the pollution of the environment, changing moral standards in the community, capital punishment, genetic engineering, nuclear energy, the needs of the poor, the role of women, sexism, the place of homosexuals in the church. Is not God in Christ calling us to struggle with these issues and through our struggles to love one another as God in Christ loves us?

Jesus was crucified, not because he said, "See the lilies, how they grow," but because his unconditional love called him to confront the establishment of the day with the demand of right relationships in all areas of life.

### C. A HOUSE OF PRAYER FOR ALL NATIONS

The activities permitted by the religious authorities in the court of the Gentiles was a reflection of their attitudes to their mission to be "a light to the Gentiles."

Jesus was incensed. He reminds them that scripture said, "Thy house shall be called a house of prayer for all nations." How could a Gentile seeker after God commune with God in the midst of the market-place activities organized by the religious leaders?

It was true that it was easier to make the required sacrifices, with the birds and animals right on the premises. They could more easily give their tithe in Temple money with the money-changer right there. They could more easily fulfill the ritual requirements of religion. But was true communion, was true fellowship with God, possible?

So, once again, this story raises serious questions for us. Someone has said, "It is not enough that we gather about us the paraphernalia of religion, content with fine buildings, skillful ministry and impressive services. Whenever the Church becomes complacent and institutionalized, whenever ritual and routine replace living power, whenever there is no growing fruit but only superficial "churchiness", then we fail to live as the true Temple of God."

The questions we must be continually asking ourselves are: Do we offer all who come to worship the presence of God? Does our worship and life and work as a congregation make our God visible to others? Is the God we make visible the God revealed in Jesus our Christ?

Jesus was reminding people of his day that God calls us to be a praying people. He demonstrated in his own life that prayer was the way into the presence of God, and the way to sustain one's relationship to God. It was through prayer that certain diseases were healed, and wholeness of life received.

Are we a praying church, a praying people? Prayer as understood by Jesus was never a pious activity that avoided involvement with life. William Barclay recognizes this when he writes in his book *Fishers of Men*:

"We must never forget that prayer means a co-operative effort between us and God. No sooner have we prayed than we must set out to make our prayer come true."

There is no point in a student praying to pass an examination if he has done none of the work. There is no good praying for health if we deliberately do the things which the doctor forbids us to do. There is no good in praying that God's kingdom may come and that the heathen be converted if we are not prepared to give a penny to help the work. There is no point in praying that the lonely may be cheered and the sorrowing comforted unless we are prepared to do something for the lonely and the sorrowful even in our own congregation and street."

Prayer is not a way to avoid involvement in issues. It is the willingness to be used by God to do God's will in whatever situation we find ourselves. Prayer is usually a dangerous business. It involves handing over control of one's life to God and allowing God to do with us as God wills. Therefore, to be a praying Church requires not only our participation in the ritual of prayer Sunday by Sunday, but that individually and collectively we do something about the needs and concerns expressed in prayer.

Becoming a praying church requires that we be also a praying people. We need that place in our lives where we can turn aside from the hustle and the bustle of life and spend time in communion with our God. How can we introduce another person to the presence of God if we have not experienced that presence for ourselves? How can we radiate the presence of God in our lives if we have not taken the time to cultivate the presence of God?

The Psalmist said, "Be still and know that I am God."

On the wall above my desk hangs these words,

"Slow me down, Lord.

Ease the pounding of my heart by the quieting of my mind.

Steady my hurried pace with the vision of the eternal reach of time.

Give me, amid the confusion of the day, the calmness of the everlasting hills.

Break the tensions of my nerves and muscles with the soothing music of the singing streams that live in my memory.

Help me to know the magical restoring power of sleep.

Teach me the art of taking minute vacations – of slowing down to look at a flower, to chat with a friend, to pat a dog, to read a few lines from a good book.

Slow me down, Lord,

and inspire me to send my roots deep into the soil of life's enduring values that I may grow towards the stars of my greater destiny."

As Jesus looked out over the city of Jerusalem he knew this was the day that the Temple had to be cleansed.

What about our Temple? Are there resentments? Are there grudges: are there prejudices? Are we just too busy? Are there pockets of selfishness, pride, indifference, that need to be swept away so that God may guide our every step?

## CONCLUSION

So Jesus made his stand. He confronted the religious establishment in the citadel of their power. He drove out the merchants and money-changers. But did it do any good? Did the court of the Gentiles remain empty of the merchants and money-changers? Did it remain the place of prayer it was intended to be? Perhaps for a few days. Human nature being what it is, I suspect it didn't last. For just a few days later, in the dead of night while his friends were sleeping and the

crowds dispersed to their homes, they arrested him. Before anyone could re-act, the trial was over and he was hung on a cross outside the city wall as an example for anyone else who dared to confront the establishment.

Life in the temple quickly returned to normal. But in 70 AD the Temple and the city were destroyed. The Temple was never rebuilt. Jesus had made his stand. He had declared in unmistakable terms God's expectation. Their opportunity came and went. Was it worth it? Christian history declares a triumphant Yes!

And so James Russel Lowell reminds us:

“Once to every man and nation comes the moment to decide  
in the strife of truth with falsehood, for the good or evil side.  
Some great cause, God's new Messiah  
offering each the bloom or blight,  
and the choice goes by forever twixt that darkness and that light.”

As God in Christ confronts us in and through the issues of our day, where and on what shall we take our stand?

## (VII) HE ACTED WITH AUTHORITY

### TEXT:

*"By what authority are you acting like this?*

*Who gave you authority to act in this way?*

Mark 11:28

### INTRODUCTION

Jesus was walking in the Temple. As he walked down the east side of the Court of the Gentiles beneath the arcade called Solomon's Porch, the 38-foot high Corinthian columns towered above him. Turning along the south side he strolled through the Royal Cloister surrounded by four rows of marble columns, each six feet in diameter and 30 feet high. There were 162 of them.

As he walked he remembered that day when, as a boy, he had stopped among these very columns to talk with the elders of Israel. He remembered how he had intended only to stop for a few minutes and then catch up with his parents. But the moments had become hours and then days as his mind was opened to the great religious truths of his people.

Now it was he who walked and taught, where once he had listened and discovered. It was in this setting that a delegation from the highest religious authority in the land, the Sanhedrin, approached him and asked, "Who gave you the authority to act in this way?"

It was the crucial question for them, and it is still a crucial question for us.

### A) THE AUTHORITY OF JESUS

What would we make of a man who arrived in our city riding on a donkey and who allowed the crowds who observed his arrival to sing his praises? What would we make of a man who was able, with just a word, to make a fig tree wither and die? What would we make of a man who opposed the exploitation of ordinary people in the name of religion?

By what authority did he seem to change the religious practices approved by the religious leaders of the day?

From the beginning of his ministry those who listened to him with an uncritical ear heard a voice of authority. When he taught in the Synagogue in Capernaum Mark reports, "The people were astounded at his teaching. For unlike the doctors of the law he taught with a note of authority." (Mark 1:22)

One day he was teaching a very large crowd in someone's home when, to everyone's surprise, the roof above Jesus was removed and down through the hole came a litter on which lay a paralyzed man. Jesus' first words were, "Your sins are forgiven." This immediately created a furor. No-one can forgive sins save God.

Now it was believed that sins and sickness were directly related. To be sick was a sure sign that one was a sinner, afflicted by the Prince of Demons. Therefore, Jesus took the next step and told the paralyzed man to take up his bed and go home. To everyone's astonishment the man rose from his bed, rolled it up and went home, proving in an unmistakable fashion that Jesus had the power to forgive sins. In fact, he was so effective in the healing of the sick that the authorities, rather than recognize God working through him, declared that he must be in league with the Prince of Devils.

Though the religious leaders would not recognize Jesus as one with divine authority, a Roman Centurion, a Gentile did, when he approached Jesus on behalf of a member of his household who was sick. The Centurion was one who possessed authority, an authority bestowed upon him by the Roman Emperor. He saw Jesus as one in similar circumstances, though in a different realm. There was, he believed, no need for Jesus to come to his home to heal his servant. All that was needed was the word of command to be given and he believed that healing would take place. Professor Dodd says of this incident:

"But still more remarkable is it that Jesus seems to have endorsed it, and this could only be in the sense that the authority he exercised is that of Almighty God. But a man who is already exercising the authority of God is beyond the category of prophet or teacher as normally understood."

When we turn to Matthew's account of the teaching of Jesus, which he gathered together under the theme of the Sermon on the Mount, we find Jesus first quoting the Law of Moses, "You have learned that our forefathers were told, 'Do not commit murder'. But what I tell you is this, anyone who nurses anger against his brother must be brought to judgement. If he abuses his brother he must answer for it in the courts; if he sneers at him he will have to answer for it in the fires of hell."

This format is repeated several times as Jesus deals with a number of the laws. The implication of what Jesus is saying is that the Law of Moses, held to have been the ultimate law by his people for centuries, was no longer adequate. It did not go far enough.

Harold Bosley, in his book *The Mind of Christ* writes:

"Read the Sermon on the Mount again – slowly, aloud, thoughtfully, prayerfully. We will find ourselves looking at the stark outline of a wonderfully, radically, different life and

world from the one we live in. we will discover ourselves to be under the judgement of the will of God; we will discover that our scale of values is hopelessly inadequate, that the loyalties of our life need both a new centre and a new power.”

He tells us we can and must conquer greed, lust, anger, and hate. He tells us we can and must learn the ways of service, forgiveness and love.

In the light of all what Jesus had done and said in the weeks and months prior to his arrival in Jerusalem, culminating in the cleansing of the Temple, it is little wonder that the authorities demand to know by what Authority he is acting the way he is.

#### B) THE PROBLEM OF AUTHORITY THEN

Those entrusted with the oversight and direction of the religious life of Israel were faced with the age-old problem. Faced with an individual who proclaims views that differ from the traditionally accepted mainstream of religious thought and life, what does one do? By what yardstick do you judge whether they are true or false? What authority verifies that this new direction is God's will for the people?

Their question posed a dilemma for Jesus. If he answered that it was under his own authority, the authorities might be justified in arresting him as a megalomaniac before he did any further damage. If he said he was acting under the authority of God, he could be arrested on a charge of blasphemy on the grounds that God would never give any man the authority to cause a disturbance in the courts of His own house.

Jesus avoids the box they tried to push him into by turning the question back to his questioners, “Was John the Baptist's work, in your opinion, human or divine?” If they would answer his question, he would answer theirs.

John had raised serious problems for them as well. This austere man of the desert was a direct contrast to their own affluent and easy-going lifestyle. He had called people to a baptism of repentance, something unheard of in Judaism. He had proclaimed himself as the forerunner of the Messiah, even pointing to Jesus when Jesus came for baptism, as the Expected One.

They had made no protest when John had been arrested. They had allowed Herod to get rid of John. To admit now, publicly, that John had been a messenger from God, would raise serious questions about their own leadership. Yet to admit that John's ministry was not of divine origin would have caused a riot, for the people looked on John as a martyr. To have acknowledged John to be God's messenger would have involved acknowledging who Jesus really was.

If you acknowledge Divine authority in the one who presents you with a new approach to life, radical change is often called for. A.E. Harvey writes, “If Jesus was indeed God, authorized and

commissioned to speak and act as he did, then he must be obeyed and followed. If not, he must be eliminated. No middle position was possible."

Those entrusted with the oversight and direction of Israel's religious life decided that he should be eliminated. Calaphas, high priest and politician, says, "It is better that one man should die for the people than that the whole nation should be destroyed." (John 11:50)

### C) DEALING WITH AUTHORITY TODAY

We too are called upon to deal with this question of authority in our own day. But we have an added problem. Today authority of any kind is out of fashion. We want to make our own decisions according to what we like and don't like. Authority figures today are questioned mercilessly, sometimes ridiculed. This can mean a reduction in thinking and acting to the lowest common denominator.

In some discussion groups it can be simply the pooling of ignorance. The authority of the Scriptures has always been a subject to arouse heated discussion among scholars. Today those discussions are involving more and more people, especially under the impetus of the publicity being given to studies which seem to determine how much of what the Gospels claim Jesus said, what Jesus actually said.

Of course, becoming deeply engrossed in such studies can be a way of avoiding acting on the teaching of Jesus. After all, how can one act when one is unsure what Jesus is calling us to do? For example, if we are not sure that Jesus said we should love our enemies, then we don't have to love our enemies.

I am not sure that the scholars will ever totally agree on a specific list of the teachings of Jesus. Where does that leave us? Probably very frustrated. For there is a part of us that hankers for a word of authority, especially if that word supports what we would like to think or do. But why should our faith life be so different from our everyday life?

In our everyday life we are faced with a variety of voices, each demanding to be the authority in our lives. There is the voice of our parents, the voice of our peers, the voice of our employers, the voice of our political leaders, both those in power and those who would like to be in power. But it is we who have to live our lives and decide day by day whether we will accept any of these authorities or whether we are going to ignore them. Usually we decide on the basis of life experience who are the genuine authorities.

The fact that the Christian Faith, belief in Christ, has survived 2,000 years of debate, would seem to indicate that there is something in the life and teaching of Jesus which people have found to be of lasting worth.



When people say that Christianity doesn't work in a realistic world we need to ask, "Has anything else worked?" When we are told that Christian Faith is a ball and chain to personal liberty, we should ask, "Has anything else ever truly set people free?" To the charge that Jesus was a mad man, we might well say, "Look where the sane ones have landed us." The truth is that those who seek to live their lives following the teaching of Jesus have found that it does bring wholeness of life. Is not that the real authority to anyone's teaching?

If it works, if it produces a life that is more abundant, if it improves human relationships, if it brings one into a closer relationship with God, if it produces a sense of wholeness, oneness with oneself, oneness with others, and oneness with the source of all being, then surely that is its authority.

If by following the teachings of Jesus, our lives produce the fruit promised by Jesus, we have a firm basis for accepting his Authority. In everyday life we often say, "The proof of the pudding is in the eating," or "Try it, you'll like it." But if you don't try it you will never know.

Think of the individuals whose lives have been marvelously affected by this man of Nazareth.... Saul who was changed from a persecutor of Christians, holding the coats of those who stoned Stephen, the first Christian martyr, to Paul the great missionary who established congregations throughout Asia Minor; St Francis of Assisi who left the family home and business to serve the poor of his day and age; William Wilberforce who banished slavery from the British Empire; Mother Theresa who has ministered to the street people of India for years. Those unknown individuals in Eastern Europe whose faith in God as revealed in Jesus Christ, has kept the hope of freedom alive for decades and who, some claim, are the reason for the radical changes in these last two years.

## CONCLUSION

But is this sufficient evidence? Is the experience of others, which is after all hearsay, evidence sufficient to risk one's life on?

As we hear the story, as God in Christ meets us in others, as God in Christ confronts us in the crises of our lives, what do we say? Is this God in Christ the authority for us? Is God in Christ our ultimate authority?

There is much in the life of Jesus and his teaching that we don't understand. There are events in the story that defy all attempts at explanation. But the evidence is that this Jesus can, if we will let him, enable us to come to know God as a living presence. For it was through Jesus that the first disciples saw God in a new way.

But to give God in Christ ultimate authority in our lives? To let go our desire to be self-sufficient, in control of our life and destiny? For the life and teaching of Jesus to become the plumb-line which determines the way we live our lives? That can call for major changes.

But to acknowledge that Jesus acted on Divine authority, that his life and teaching are of God, requires that we too either obey him or eliminate him from our lives.

## (VIII) THE CROSS – AN AFFIRMATION OF LOVE

### TEXT:

*“And I shall draw all men to myself when I am lifted up from the earth.”*

John 12:32

*“God forbid that I should boast of anything but the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ.*

Galatians 6:14

### INTRODUCTION

Leonard Andray, a Russian writer, tells the story of Ben-Tovit, a tradesman who lived in Jerusalem at the time of Jesus' crucifixion. On the night of Jesus' trial he has been kept awake suffering from a severe toothache. As Jesus began his journey through the streets of the city, carrying his cross, Ben-Tovit is feeling very sorry for himself. His wife, hearing the procession approaching, urges him to come and watch, to which he responds, “Let me alone. Don't you see how I am suffering?” Then, thinking as his wife Sarah had seemed to suggest, that the spectacle might take his mind off his own pain, he goes to the window and looks out on the crowd going by.

He watches as Jesus collapses under the weight of the cross. He sees the Master's blood-stained cloak. The sight makes him wince with new pain. He feels as though someone has stuck a red-hot needle into his sore tooth.

His wife, feeling some sympathy for Jesus, comments that people said that Jesus restored sight to the blind. “He should have cured my toothache,” says Ben-Tovit sarcastically, as he turned away from the scene. Then their neighbor Samuel arrives and immediately Ben-Tovit begins to tell him about his toothache.

Then, at Sarah's insistence, they go to Calvary to look at the persons being crucified. On the way all Ben-Tovit can talk about is his loss of sleep and the pain of his toothache. By the time they reach the place of execution, darkness has fallen. They take a quick look at the bodies hanging there and, at Ben-Tovit's urging, they head for home. All the way home he continues his recital of the pain he has to endure, and the inconvenience his toothache has caused him.

How often do we get so caught up in our particular experience of life, our particular pain, our particular disappointment, the inconveniences we experience, that the pain of others is

ignored, the Cross of Christ received not a second glance. In fact, the sign of another's pain, another's suffering may only serve to deepen our own depression, our own personal anguish.

#### A) THE FOCUS OF THE CROSS

But there were those who were able to stand at the foot of the cross, having watched the nails being driven into those caring hands, and they remained there until the bitter end.

Mary tells us that there were a number of women who were also present – Mary of Magdala, Mary the mother of James the younger and Joseph, and Salome. They had followed him while in Galilee and had come with him to Jerusalem. All their hopes and dreams had been focused on this man who now hung from the central cross.

Jesus said, "And I shall draw all men to myself when I am lifted up from the earth." As Jesus journeyed towards Jerusalem and his confrontation with the authorities, as he became more and more aware of the certainty of dying on a cross, he seems to have sensed that this Cross, though despised by many, would nevertheless become a magnetic force drawing suffering humanity towards him.

It was not simply his pain and suffering that drew the women to the cross, nor is it simply his pain and suffering that draws us to the cross, but the love that that pain and suffering demonstrates. It is the realization that this Jesus gave his life because of his love for all of us.

Leslie Weatherhead, long-time minister of City Temple in London, England, tells the story of a mischievous boy whose parents tried everything imaginable to make him behave. They stopped his allowance. They sent him to his room. They deprived him of the things he liked. Nothing worked, it seemed only to make him more determined than ever to be disobedient. Then something happened. He had a much-loved pet, a little wire-haired terrier. One hot afternoon he was trying to teach his dog a new trick. The dog seemed very tired and he became impatient. When the dog failed to understand what his master wanted him to do, the boy kicked the little dog. With his big brown eyes the dog looked at him, puzzled and then very painfully struggled onto his hind legs and put up his paws, trying hard to learn the new trick.

Then, as the boy came close, the dog licked his master's hand. The boy broke down and, blinded by his tears, he ran sobbing to his mother. "Whatever's the matter?" she asked. "I've done an awful thing," sobbed the boy. "I've done an awful thing."

Restrictions never reached him, confinement never touched him. But suffering love alone reached him. This is what the cross has done for almost 2,000 years. Legalism was unable to do it. It simply made people more rebellious and bitter. Just talking about love does not touch our heart or change our attitude. The truth enshrined in Good Friday is, that when love is crucified, lives are touched, lives are changed.

Ever since, the Cross has been the central symbol of our faith. It can speak to us no matter what our need. Paul Rees writes:

"The cross does not so much reveal God's mind, that is, his infinite intellect, as it reveals his heart. It is God himself getting through to our hearts, tracking us down in our sins with love's relentlessness, forgiving those sins, shattering the old self-centredness of us and putting God at the centre of a new life and a new man."

Andrew Murray puts it this way:

"The cross of Christ does not make God love us. It is the outcome and measure of his love for us."

When Joan of Arc knew that she had been betrayed, to be burned at the stake by the leaders of her own people, George Bernard Shaw, in his play, has her say: "I will go out now to the common people, and let the love in their eyes comfort me, for the hate in yours. You will be glad to see me burnt; but if I go through fire, I shall go through it to their hearts for ever."

Jesus, lifted up upon a cross, became for all time the King of Love, enthroned for ever in the hearts of those who have the eyes to see and the ears to hear.

## B) TO BOAST IN THE CROSS

Paul was one for whom the Cross of Christ was the central focus of his life. In his letter to the Galatians, he said, "God forbid that I should boast of anything but the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ."

Boasting is a human weakness. We would all like people to know about the good we have done, The people we have helped, the organizations we belong to, for we are judged by our peers as to our success or failure in life in terms of what we have accomplished. We enjoy talking about our new job, especially when it's an upward move. We enjoy showing off our new car, the pictures of our grandchildren and great-grandchildren. But, for Paul, the only thing to take pride in is the cross of Christ. As Christians, our only justification in life is to be the people of the Cross.

Paul, it is true, was often embroiled in controversy in the Church. There were those who insisted that any Gentile who wished to become a Christian must first become a Jew. There were two reasons for this. As Judaism had special privileges under Rome, they could avoid persecution as a sect of Judaism. But probably more important was the belief that one could win approval from God by the keeping of the Jewish religious law, including circumcision and the Ten Commandments. Paul, however, was convinced that no-one could win God's approval no matter what they did. God's grace is free, unconditional.

For Paul, the Cross is all-sufficient. It is through Christ and his cross, and that alone, that we are able to return to fellowship with God, to be at one with God. Paul was prepared to suffer and

die for that belief. The Cross, crucifixion, God's unconditional love for all humanity, is still a major stumbling block for many people. We much prefer to follow a set of rules and regulations so that we can take personal pride in having kept the law, and thus achieved our oneness with God by our own efforts. Thus the popularity of the song, "I did it my way."

For something so important, so valuable, to be free for everyone, does not seem right or just.

### C) HOW DOES THE CRUCIFIED SAVE US?

But the Gospel, the Good News, is that we are saved by Grace, the unconditional love of God, and by nothing else. The Clinebells, in their book *The Intimate Marriage*, define grace as "the accepting love which one does not need to earn because it is present as a spontaneous expression of the relationship."

Why do we find this so hard to accept? I sense that we have developed a hierarchy of wrongdoing. For some murder and homosexuality are high on the list, while such things as nursing anger, resentment, thinking lustfully about one who is not our spouse, are low on the list, if they even appear. The wrongs we do, we do not consider very sinful. We can live with them. We have not come to the place where, like the little boy who kicked his dog, we can say, "I have done an awful thing." We do not see our wrongdoing, our sins, as being awful. Instead of talking about sin, we speak of misbehavior a misdemeanor, an error in calculation.

Today we have no-fault insurance, no fault divorce. No-one may be singled out as being responsible. But does that mean that no-one is responsible?

This has led to an equally popular concept of no-fault theology. Flip Wilson may have made us laugh when he did something ornery and then said, "The devil made me do it." But that is just another way of refusing to take any responsibility for our actions.

Then there are those who say, "I was only following orders," "everybody else was doing it," "I didn't want to be square." We can blame our environment, our parents, our social or economic system, our peer group. Ann Russel sums it up when she writes:

"At three I had a feeling of ambivalence towards my brothers. And so it follows naturally I poisoned all my lovers. But now I'm happy; I have learned the lesson this has taught me. That everything I do that's wrong is someone else's fault."

A Sunday school teacher explained to her Sunday school class how Jesus saves us from our sins. She told them of his death, his resurrection and how he is now seated on the right hand of God. She went on to say that when we do things that are wrong, God feels badly. Then she asked, "Why do you think God feels badly?" One little girl in the class replied, "Because Jesus is sitting on his hand." It is not only children who have difficulty grasping the pain God feels when we do wrong, and the place the cross has in putting things right.

While there is still a great deal of mystery, a thought that I have found helpful is that the biblical meaning of sin is to have missed the mark of our high calling to be children of God. When we do anything that is not within God's will, the relationship God wants to have with us is broken, and God suffers because of that brokenness. The Cross is God's way of saying that God wants us to come home. All is forgiven if we will, as the prodigal did, turn our back on the past and head for home.

Arnold Bennet, in one of his novels, tells of two cynics watching a Church School's Easter pageant. The couple view the scene with derision. The fellow says to the girl, "There is no virtue in believing that." Suddenly the children sing:

"When I survey the wondrous cross  
On which the Prince of Glory died  
My richest gain I count but loss  
And pour contempt on all my pride."

The girl, who had never before been affected by any sort of religion, became genuinely moved. Swiftly she turns her head to conceal her emotions. "What's wrong with you?" the fellow asks. She replies, "It would be worth anything and everything in the world to be able to say those words and to mean them."

When I survey the wondrous cross..... What is our response? What is the significance of the cross for you?

Prior to Lincoln's election his arch enemy was a man called Stanton. Stanton used every opportunity to denounce and degrade Lincoln in public. After the election Lincoln chose Stanton to fill an important cabinet post because he believed he was the best man in the nation for that particular job. After Lincoln was assassinated, Stanton stood by the coffin and declared that the man he once hated was one of the greatest men who ever lived.

The Cross makes reconciliation possible. For we believe that in the Cross, God was in Christ reconciling the world, the whole world, all people to himself. Crucified love can transform the world.

## CONCLUSION

Thus the Cross is a paradox. On the one side it symbolizes the greatest evil ever perpetrated, the willful killing of God who came among us in Jesus of Nazareth. It is an evil which continues to be perpetrated – in the Belsens, Hiroshimas, the Baghdads and Kuwaits, the refugee camps and ghettos of our modern world, whoever and whenever God's children suffer because of human lust for power, no matter how we seek to justify our actions.

But the cross is also an everlasting affirmation of God's love. A love so amazing, so divine "it demands my life, my soul, my all." At least that is the way I see it. How do you see it?