

THE SENT-DOWN MAN

Text on Good Friday

April 22, 2011

Luke 14: 7-11

“For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you . . . If you know these things, you are blessed if you do them.”

Will Christianity pass away? Will some other religion or philosophy take its place? You hear such questions from time to time. The so-called “new atheists” like Sam Harris and Richard Dawkins aim to inspire readers with the hope that all religions might soon join the dinosaurs in extinction. At the other extreme, television preachers still fill your ears with their bombast, sure that the glory of their “true church” will never pass from the earth. I don’t know about that. A scripture says that “nothing will be impossible with God.” On the question whether God will keep God’s savings in the church forever, we might better err on the side of caution.

Yet it seems to me that on earth, the power of the Cross of Christ will never pass away. Here is why. Most symbols celebrate success. Think of the symbols for Coca Cola, Nike, Microsoft Windows. The evidence of the success of these enterprises fairly dances in our heads; at the sound of the name, the type face and the colors of the logos fly instantly to the mind’s eye. Think of the American flag. Talk about brand-name recognition! These symbols proclaim a message we are always hungry for, namely, that more is better. Every symbol that pleases us—even the dollar sign on our weekly paycheck, if we like our check; even our home address embossed on stationery, if we like our address—signifies that this thing has succeeded—has climbed over—something else, with power. It is more! It is bigger, it is sweeter, it is quieter, it is higher. Now, this condition isn’t bad. I am not preaching “Ain’t it awful?” I’m just saying, *Ain’t it so?* We’re creatures, and creatures are bound and determined—yes, bound and determined by forces we do not control, just as the sciences say—bound and determined to look for more. That’s life. It is not freedom, but it is life in the flesh.

But however high things climb, two more conditions always hold: 1) something will always surpass our more with its more; and 2) eventually, we will fall. You cannot forever improve your position with more power. You simply don’t have it, or won’t have it. Every greatest athlete will hang up his shoes. Coke will get cooked. Windows will close. Promotions will cease. Even the United States of America will someday tumble down, and all these symbols will succumb. Is this awful? People may make the passage through these rapids awful. —we often do, for others as well as for ourselves—but it does not follow that fading away just plain *is* awful. The condition of endless rise and fall is *just plain so*. It is not freedom, but it is life as we know it.

Yet what we really wanted—was heaven. Once, what could stop us? Not the skies, it seemed. We were Babel builders, heading higher, higher. Oh, the exquisite thrill when we are running our race with all our strength and all our gift! There's been blessing in it, surely. But heaven we could not have by straining for it. Perfection eluded us, even deluded us. Is it real—heaven?

There was a passage to perfection, though. There was a way to go whose path is never barred, whose pitch is not too steep, whose goal is never put behind. It is the path of giving by going lower. On this path, there is no end but God, for no matter how low another creature is or has fallen, you, by the grace of God, can choose to go down a step lower, to be sent down to serve. It is not that you always must, but that you always can. This is freedom. It is not life as we knew it, but it is the stairway to heaven. It goes down.

In the 1930s, a Russian citizen named Lulia de Beausobre was subjected to torture in the *gulag* of the Soviet Union. In her autobiography, *The Woman Who Could Not Die*, she tells how she came to life *in extremis*. Alone in her cell between sessions with her tormentors, she engaged an inner conversation between herself and a partner of spirit which she called “my Leonardo.” One day, her inner Leonardo spoke to her of the possibility that she might transform her suffering:

If you want to understand, to know the truth about this sort of thing, you must rise higher and look deeper. If you do, you can transform the ghastly bond into that magic wand which changes horror into beauty . . . It is unpardonable that anyone should be tortured, even you—if you merely leave it at that. But, surely, when you overcome the pain inflicted on you by them, you make their criminal record less villainous. Even more, you bring something new into it—a thing of precious beauty.

But when, through weakness, cowardice, lack of balance, lack of serenity, you augment your pain, their crime becomes so much the darker. And it is darkened by you. If you could understand this, your making yourself invulnerable would be not only an act of self-preservation; it would be a kindness to Them . . . Look right down into the depths of your heart and tell me—Is it not right for you to be kind to them—even to them—*particularly* to them, perhaps? Is it not right that those men who have no kindness within them should get a surplus of it flowing towards them from without? . . . And the whole of me responds with a “Yes!” like a throb of thundering music.¹

Now, you think: “I could not do that.” But you have no idea what you can do. We have no idea what we can do because we have no idea who we are—so long as we seek just more through our strengths. On that path, we are bound and determined always and only to make more of our self, to make more of our self. Never can there come anything divinely new into our self-made man or woman. There is no real freedom on the path of more.

But if, like the sent-down man whose name you have freely taken, you go seeking the seat at the low place; if you follow the example that was set; if you cease scraping to save your life and let go, suddenly an infinite horizon for freedom and action opens. Your energy, intelligence, imagination, and love will never exhaust the possibilities for refreshment as you find the right way to kneel for the other in perfecting humility. Down that road, following the sent-down man, is found the only country in which you are no longer bound and determined, the only land of the free. There is no conflict you have in your family or with your neighbor at church or with your co-worker in which you cannot, with generous genius, find that low door through which you can step down to serve them as one looking up. There is not a grievance in your mind or in your body whose pain will not be transformed by your free decision to let go, to find the low place of the servant.

The reason these things are so is simple. When you follow the sent-down man down, you cease making more of your self. In that act, you begin *being* made by God; being made human, a being made in the image of God, in the image of the sent-down man. Until heaven and earth should pass away, the sent-down man and his Cross will never pass away, for the way of the Cross is the only road that has no end but God. Go this way in peace.

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C.J. Jung on the preconditions for human renewal:

A human relationship is not based on differentiation and perfection, for these only emphasize the differences or call forth the exact opposite; it is based, rather, on imperfection, on what is weak, helpless, and in need of support—the very ground and motive for dependence. The perfect have no need of others, but weakness has... it is from need and distress that new forms of existence arise, and not from idealistic requirements or mere wishes. What our world lacks is the psychic connection; no clique, no community of interests, no political party, and no State will ever be able to replace this.”

1. Cited by Princeton Seminary professor Diogenes Allen in *Traces of God*