

THE SENT-DOWN MAN

Text on Maundy Thursday

April 5, 2007

John 13: 1-17

Will Christianity pass away? Will some other religion or philosophy of life take its place? You hear such questions from time to time. In his book *Letter to a Christian Nation*, the “new atheist” Sam Harris endeavors to inspire his readers with his hope that all religion might soon follow the mastodon into extinction. On the other hand, bombastic television preachers will fill your ears with their certainty that it is impossible that the glory of their “true church” should ever pass from the earth. I don’t know about that. Scripture says “nothing will be impossible with God.” I like to err on the side of caution on the question, whether God will keep his savings in Christendom’s church “forever.”

I have nevertheless a strong sense that the symbol of the Cross of Christ will simply never pass away. Here is why. Most symbols celebrate success. Think of logos for Coke, Nike, Microsoft Windows. The evidence of the success of these enterprises fairly dances in our heads; the colors, even the typography, come instantly to mind with the sounding of the name. Think of the American flag. Talk about brand-name recognition! These symbols stand for, and help proclaim, a message that humans are always hungry for, namely, that more is better. Every symbol that dazzles our eye—even the dollar sign on our weekly paycheck, if we like it; even our home address embossed on stationery, if we like it, signifies that something has succeeded—climbed over—something else, with power. It is more, it is bigger, it is sweeter, it is quieter, it is higher. This condition isn’t bad. Please don’t hear me preaching “Ain’t it awful?” It’s just—*Ain’t it so?* We’re creatures, and creatures are bound—yes, bound; and determined, in the sense of behavioral psychology, by forces we do not control—bound and determined to seek for more. That’s life. It is not freedom, but it is life in the flesh.

Yet however high things climb, two conditions always hold: 1) something will always surpass our more with its more; and 2) eventually, we will fall. You cannot forever perfect 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 America will tumble down. And all the logos will fade. Is this awful? Although men may make their passage through these rapids awful, for others as for themselves, it does not make sense to say that a condition which belongs to the nature of things is simply awful. Such a judgment would be immature, and premature. The condition of endless rise and fall is *just 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?

Yet there was a passage to perfection. There was a way to go whose path is never barred, whose pitch is not too steep, whose peak 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 must, but that you can. And 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 Iulia de Beausobre was submitted 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 of her transforming 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?

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. You have no idea what you can do because you have no idea who you are—as long as you seek perfection through strength. On that path, your freedom is bound and determined, for you are always and only making more of yourself. Never can there come anything divinely new into our self-made man or woman.

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 kneel yourself at the foot of the other, 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 way, following the sent-down man, is the only country in which you are no longer bound and no longer determined. There is no conflict you have with your beloved or with your child or with your neighbor in which you cannot, with generous genius, discover a hidden door through which you can step down to serve them as one who is looking up. There is not a grievance in your mind or in your body whose pain will not be transformed by your free choice to let go and go down, to find the servant’s place.

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

“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.”

Rev. Stephen H. Phelps
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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*