

9B 2021

After ministering throughout Galilee and beyond, Jesus returns to his hometown of Nazareth, only to find people there incredulous.

“Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary and brother of James and Joses and Judas and Simon, and are not his sisters here with us?’ And they took offense at him.”

They do not want to believe that the carpenter, the son of common folk, could be a person of such substance.

There is no cultural capital in holding such a belief; no one will admire us for knowing a humble teacher.

People want to identify with someone grand so that they can feel superior, so that they can have power over others.

“I once saw Herod pass by on his way to Rome” would gain us more admiration than “I know well the carpenter from our village who has turned out to be a person of spiritual depth.”

Our tendency to desire the admiration of others rather than to seek out things of lasting value reminds me of something that happened to my college advisor when the university tasked him with creating an undergraduate alcohol abatement program.

(You might recall that people on my freshman hall were showing up drunk in class.)

I suppose the university chose my advisor because he was a creative thinker who himself was in AA.

He was also a practical man.

Rather than reinvent the wheel, he sought a program that already had proved successful at another school.

After much work, he presented his findings.

He had discovered a program at a state school that had greatly reduced drinking among students.

The university dismissed his hard work with one sentence: “That is not a school with which we wish to be compared.”

Not only people, but also institutions seek to increase their cultural capital, to look good in the eyes of others despite losing actual value.

The hometown crowd was not about to accept Jesus because it gained them no admiration in the eyes of other people who were equally unable to see.

Of course, they were correct insofar as their assumption that those who gain the admiration of others usually advance in this world.

My advisor might have been promoted had he offered the university a useless plan that pleased their egos—“This is what they do at Cambridge; we’ll just ignore how ineffective it is.”

As Christians, however, we know that worldly success is irrelevant to God.

We are here to learn how to love, how to live with integrity, not how to climb a social ladder that in all cases will be cut down by death.

You may remember that I watched a Netflix series where people arrive in hell but are told they are in “The Good Place.”

Gradually they realize that they are being tortured in creative ways that exacerbate their guilt and feelings of inadequacy.

A group of them bond and start to care for one another; that is, they grow.

In the last season, they seek to prove to angels and demons that others also can grow after death.

To test their assertion, they are charged with helping several new residents of “the good place” to start caring for one another.

The task is challenging, and it is astute on the part of the writers that the most intractable character is a guy who keeps bragging about everything he achieved on earth.

We see in the gospel that this attachment to earthly validation affects not only the person who seeks it, but the surrounding people—we affect one another.

Because others did not trust Jesus, he “could do no deed of power there, except that he laid his hands on a few sick people and cured them.”

In other words, like any relationship, our relationship with God is a two-way street.

If we do not do our part in trusting God, God can only do so much.

Similarly, it is difficult to help a person in any deeply meaningful way if that person
does not trust us.

This is even more difficult these days when we increasingly seek low-risk alternatives to
trusting relationships.

We want all the cultural capital with none of the risk, “likes” without truly opening
ourselves to others.

To accomplish this, we turn to our own creations to save us.

We rely more on technology than face-to-face human relationships.

As a result, an unprecedented mental health crisis is growing among children.

I was reading an article that described a 13-year-old girl who was feeling suicidal.

She put on her headphones and went for a walk alone.

She expressed surprise and an inability to process why that made her feel worse.¹

We Christians know why.

Christianity, as I have told you, is about relationship.

It is not a navel-gazing religion, not about individual enlightenment, not about rising
spiritually superior to other practitioners, but about working humbly together.

1 <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/06/28/well/mind/mental-health-kids-suicide.html>

This is why Christ tells us that leaders shall not lord it over others: “Whoever wishes to be great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be your slave; just as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve.”

The first shall be last.

For us, salvation comes through relationships as we build bonds of integrity.

We recognize that this is the only way to grow.

We were created for loving, trusting relations, but we are becoming cut off from others.

It is not that isolated thinking has no place, but that it ultimately must point back to being in relationship with others.

Acknowledging our mutual dependence upon others for our own salvation requires humility.

I have been rewatching the old Star Trek’s of my youth.

In one episode, a creature invades the Enterprise and takes control of the crew by tapping into each person’s deepest fears.

Captain Kirk fears losing command, losing control of his ship such that he cannot provide for the safety of all aboard.

It is through his first officer, Spock, that he overcomes that fear.

The writers got that part right.

Spock witnesses that Kirk is still in command, Kirk accepts that, and is no longer afraid.

We need others to validate us just as they need us to validate them.

Without that, we are limited in what we can achieve.

We require emotional co-regulation to produce a world in which we can share a vision.

Saint Moses the Black was a fourth century slave of a government official in Egypt who dismissed him for theft and suspected murder.

Saint Moses then became the leader of a gang of bandits who spread terror throughout the Nile Valley.

To hide from local authorities, he sheltered with some monks in a colony in the desert.

The monks' dedication and contentment influenced Moses deeply.

He soon gave up his old way of life, was baptized, and joined the monastic community.²

Of course, it is possible for entire groups to become cut off and lose their grounding, their integration in the whole.

They can develop a shared psychotic disorder.

Sadly, the internet allows this to flourish as people see only the kind of information that appeals to their emotional state.

The crucifixion itself was the result of a shared psychotic disorder in which people, whipped up by their leaders, believed that Christ was in some way harmful.

2 <https://www.missionstclare.com/english/July/whole/morning/02m.html>

As Voltaire said, “Those who can make you believe absurdities can make you
commit atrocities.”

Christianity calls on us to see things not as we want to see them, but to see them as
they are.

It calls us to work together, and to do that, we must trust God and one another.

There are many reasons to be concerned about the world, but remember that, even
if the entire earth collapses in on itself, God can raise up another.

I am not saying that we should not protect and nurture the world around us, but that
we need not lie awake at night in a depression.

We trust God, trust that, whatever happens, the things that really matter will persist.
God will still be God.

We can still build relationships of trust and integrity, and from that, we will grow in
our knowledge of love.

We will not be abandoned.

Our spirits will still be offered challenges that help us.

We need not be like the people in Jesus’ hometown or in Jerusalem before the
crucifixion.