

The Humble King

Jesus has continued his journey south. He has left the Decapolis behind having fed the 4000. He has left Caesarea Philippi behind having heard Peter's confession. And he is back in his own territory. He is back in the Galilee. He is back in Capernaum, his movement's headquarters. He is in *the* house. Not a house. *The* house. A specific identifiable location. Probably Peter's own house—the house where Peter's mother-in-law was healed from a fever, the house whose roof was ripped off to lower the paralyzed man. Jesus has returned to the familiar.

You'd think he'd lighten up a little. Take a break from the dark turn that his teaching took last week. But no. Our New Testament effectively opens with a continuation of Jesus's teaching from last week: the Son of Man will be handed over to evil people. He will be killed. And after three days, he will rise again. This repetition, with what follows, takes us further into what we called last week Jesus's counterintuitive, topsy turvy teaching on entering the kingdom. It's all about humility.

The Example of Humility

As the passage opens, Jesus provides the disciples with an example of humility. *The* example of humility in fact. And I'd like you to notice first of all that this a private preparation. Jesus, the text says, did not want anyone to know that he was back in his familiar territory. His ministry of evangelization, his proclamation of the kingdom, is, from here on effectively over. From here on, the teaching is private preparation. Jesus prepares his disciples privately about what is going to transpire in just a few weeks in Jerusalem. And he's not just preparing them by foretelling what is going to happen—though that is the immediate impact of his teaching. He is also giving them a model which they **will have to follow** if they are would be his disciples. This is a teaching about how to be a disciple and it is intended for disciples. This is in house. This is private preparation.

The next piece I'd like you to notice is that humility is baked in from the beginning in the teachings incredible irony. Who will be delivered into the hands of wicked men to be killed? Jesus does not use the first-person pronoun here. He does not say I. Rather he says "the Son of Man." Son of Man is Jesus's favorite title for himself in the Synoptics. (It's quite rare in the Gospel of John, but we'll leave that there). The Son of Man is a messianic title that comes from the 7th chapter of Daniel. There, the prophet records a prophetic or apocalyptic vision in which one "like a Son of Man" comes with the clouds and great glory into heaven is presented before the Ancient of Days—i.e., God. This mysterious figure then receives from God a kingdom that will never end. So, this is a loaded title.

In taking this name for himself, Jesus makes a claim to near divine identity and status. When we take up our reading today, the miracle of the transfiguration has just happened—replete with the very clouds of glory that Daniel talked about. Just prior that miracle, Jesus himself said that some of his disciples would not die until they saw the kingdom of God come in power. This is all the language of Daniel 7.

Now imagine the irony when Jesus says to his disciples: this very figure—who's me—must first be handed over to wicked men and be killed and then rise again. There is no hook for them to hang that on! The biblical light wouldn't come on until after the resurrection when the Risen Lord opened to them the scriptures showing that he would suffer. But for now, they don't get it.

They are confused. They are full of consternation. And as a result refused to ask just what Jesus meant. What a shame that their confusion and consternation, their misunderstanding and fear to the better of them. What would they have learned had they asked?

Well, among the things they would have learned is this: humility is not weakness. By taking the title Son of Man for himself here, Jesus emphasizes that from beginning to end, he is the one in control. None of this would be happening without, in effect, his own permission. His setting his face like flint toward his destiny, his embrace of the way of the cross, the way of suffering and death, is not inevitable. Jesus humbly accepts this destiny as his for the sake of the salvation of the world, your salvation and mine. But make no mistake. It was not because he was caught up in a spiralling series of events beyond his control. He is the Son of Man, who for a time and out of his great love, sets aside the privileges of his being, in order to take our sin and dysfunction into himself and thereby take it away. He who could have taken the throne by right freely took the weakest place and so reconciled us to God. Humility is not weakness.

But the disciples were confused and afraid and so did not ask. Nevertheless, the lesson is there for us. Christ provides for us the example of what humility is by declaring himself to be the Son of Man and taking the way of the Cross. Humility, according to the example we are called to follow on the way of the cross, is not weakness.

The Ethics of Humility

Let's now move from Christ as our example of humility to the kind of ethic humility calls forth from us. First of all, humility, simply by being humility silences pride. I'm not sure this is a habit that we can cultivate, or a skill that we can practice, or even a quality that we would ever notice in ourselves. But we notice it in others. And we notice it here again in our example, Jesus, when he asks a simple question: "What were you talking about on the way?" And the disciples were silent. Why? The question is straightforward and uncomplicated. It's not that it is confrontational in itself. It is, simply that Jesus's own adoption of the lesser place, his embrace and living out of his Father's plan, his humility puts the disciples on the spot and it shuts them up.

It shuts them up because they were not (yet) on board with the call of Jesus to take up the cross. They are still confused and afraid. And, because their proud, rather than admit to their fear and find themselves freed of it, they begin to talk about themselves about who is the greatest. What strikes me, further, is that as Jesus goes to Jerusalem, this is *the* central preoccupation of the disciples. In the very next paragraph, John betrays his own sense of status when he says this to Jesus: "Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in your name and we told him to stop because he was not one of us!" Then, just a few verses later, John and his brother James (and in Matthew's telling, their mother) come to Jesus and ask, "Teacher, do for us whatever we ask! When you come into your kingdom, put one of us on your right hand and the other on your left." It is striking that the closer Jesus gets to his cross, the further away the disciples seem.

Humility and Pride cannot cohabit. Indeed, humility simply by being present confounds and silences the proud. Indeed, in the words of our Lord's blessed mother, it scatters them. And here, Jesus silences the proud, his own disciples, and at least for a time, scatters their desires for greatness.

Next notice that the humility modeled by Jesus ignores position. “If anyone would be first, he must be last of all and servant of all.” he says. This is a teaching that runs through the Gospel. And it is one that is often and sometimes even deliberately misunderstood and misrepresented. It is often taken to mean a simple egalitarianism. A flattening of hierarchy. An obliteration of any sort of distinction. And that, simply, is wrong. Jesus doesn’t flatten hierarchy. He introduces a different one. His is not a simply renunciation of greatness. It is rather that he inverts the route to greatness. Do you want to be great? The route to greatness in my kingdom is not to push yourself to the front of the line, to take the higher place at banquets, to assert yourself or to claim what is your right. It is rather to take the lower place. It is to serve. It is to do your good deeds in secret. Our Lord himself, according to the Scriptures, endured the cross for the sake of the joy set before him—the joy that his in reconciling us to his Father in the power of the Spirit. Do you want to be great in the Kingdom? TO share in the Joy of the Son of Man? Forsake position. Forsake power. Ignore position. Take the way of the cross.

Finally, notice that the humility modeled by Jesus, the humble way of life to which he calls us, receives the weakest. He took a child and placed him in the middle of the conversation, and then took him in his arms. We’re not talking about an infant here. The word denotes a little child—a toddler say—and the context reinforces that image. The child is there, big enough to be apart from close parental supervision yet small enough to be taken up into our Lord’s arms. Before he says a word, he models the kind of humility that walks the way of the cross: it does not only embrace the lower position, but it also receives the weakest. Here is a little child—someone who can offer nothing of worth, but actually is a burden—receive that child.

How do we treat the weakest in our society? What does our treatment of those who can offer us nothing, but consume a great deal tell us about ourselves? I’m sure if I give examples, I’ll upset some people. So I won’t. I’ll leave it there. I’ll say only that our society’s treatment of its most vulnerable members shows us to be a very proud society. A society that ultimately values people only according to their ability to generate wealth or their beauty or their talent. And that simply is not Jesus’s way. Jesus’s way is to receive the child, is to receive the old and infirm.

Magnanimity was one of the great virtues in ancient pagan Rome. It means greatheartedness. Generosity if you want. And in pagan Rome, magnanimity was displayed in the construction of great monuments and buildings that would carry the donor’s name into the eternal memory of Roman citizens long after he was gone. And then Christianity happened. Beginning in the fourth century, historian Rodney Stark points this out in detail, magnanimity changed. It remained a virtue to be sure. But instead of places of entertainment or great monuments, it built hospitals, it built churches, and through the ministry of the church, fed the poor. Imperfect? Certainly. Early Christian Rome was not heaven on earth and that is not my point. My point is when that ancient pagan culture converted, it did at least try to relearn greatheartedness by transforming it into the means by which the weakest were received and welcomed. And in so doing, it received and welcomed Christ himself.

What a different day we live in! Journalist Louise Perry (no relation) has spoken of “repaganization.” She refers primarily to the sexualization of children and the sexual abuse of women (remember what I said about receiving the weakest?), but it is true here, too. Our culture

continues to value greatheartedness, but its generosity is directed less and less to the least and more and more recirculation among the great.

And yet, Jesus's call has not changed. Will you follow the Son of Man? Do you want to welcome Christ? Follow the humble way. Receive the weakest amongst us.

The End of Humility

Finally we need to consider the end of humility. End is a wonderfully elastic word. It can mean both a conclusion and a goal. You can see how the terms overlap. But you can also see how they are distinct. In terms of a conclusion, did you know that there is a time when the way of humility will come to an end? It will! As surely as Jesus's own resurrection and exaltation was the end of the way of the cross, so we who follow the humble king will do so right through the doors of heaven if we persevere. The way of humility will end when it reaches its goal in heaven.

In his book, *The Great Divorce*, C. S. Lewis gets at this point when he introduces one of heaven's residents in this way: "Some kind of procession was approaching us, and the light came from the persons who composed it. First came bright Spirits, not the Spirits of men, who danced and scattered flowers—soundlessly falling, lightly drifting flowers, though by the standards of the ghost-world each petal would have weighed a hundred-weight and their fall would have been like the crashing of boulders. Then, on the left and right, at each side of the forest avenue, came youthful shapes, boys upon one hand, and girls upon the other." And after the procession comes the most beautiful woman the narrator has ever seen. So regal does she appear that he wonders whether it is Mary herself. "Is it? . . . is it?" I whispered to my guide. "Not at all," said he. "It's someone ye'll never have heard of. Her name on earth was Sarah Smith and she lived at Golders Green."

And what was Sarah Smith's claim to fame? She loved her neighborhood—grown-ups, children, and even animals with the love of Christ. Anonymously. Humbly. Faithfully. That was her route for following the humble king. And now in heaven her humility has come to an end. She has been clothed with glory befitting her service. She is exalted. Which is just another way of saying, God here shows Sarah Smith to be just whom she has always been. Her humility has come to an end. It is concluded. It has met its goal in heaven. Of course, this does not mean that the residents of heaven are proud. They aren't. They have, however, received the reward for their humility.

The way to heaven, is the way of the humble king. It is the way that he himself took. The way to true greatness, the route into his kingdom is the way of the cross. There is no shame in following him who for the joy set before him endured the cross. There is no shame in embracing the way of the cross in hope of the resurrection. It is the promise of the Gospel.