

Greatness Invisible
January 2nd, 2021

Long ago, I was standing on the street waiting for my mother to come and collect me. Another young boy came over, held out a handful of coins and said, “Would you like to play with me? I will give you all of these coins if you’ll play with me.” The kid was very nice—we had played together before. At that moment, however, he looked very sad and miserable. And even though four decades have past, I can still remember his face and the painful, faraway look in his eyes. The coins he held out could not have purchased anything, even in those days, but I accepted them and we went off to play together for a while. Although I had accepted the money without any impure motives, my mother scolded me later on, telling me that I should have declined the gift. I returned the coins to the boy the next day. One of the recurring verses of this season has been “And the Word became flesh and lived among us” (John 1:14). I have thought about that verse for many, many years. It just so happened that the lectionary juxtaposed two scriptures this year that helped me look at the Word in a new light. The actual reading for today is the first part of the first chapter of the Gospel of John. The fourteenth verse is not part of the reading—but I always see the fourteenth verse as the climax of that opening to the gospel. καὶ ὁ λόγος

σὰρξ ἐγένετο καὶ ἐσκήνωσεν ἐν ἡμῖν, καὶ ἐθεασάμεθα τὴν δόξαν αὐτοῦ. Et Verbum caro factum est, et habitavit in nobis: et vidimus gloriam ejus. *And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us, and we beheld his glory.*

The reading for yesterday, New Year's Day, is from the Gospel of Matthew: "Then the king will say to those at his right hand, 'Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.' Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?' And the king will answer them, 'Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.'" (Matthew 25:34-40).

No one has ever seen God. That is what the evangelist says in the first chapter of the Gospel of John (John 1:18). And in the parable we read from the Gospel of the Matthew, the righteous citizens inheriting the kingdom

say to the king, “Lord, when was it that we saw you...?” (Matthew 25:37).

One key enigma of our faith is that God is invisible. There are two aspects to this enigma that deserve our attention. The first is that, our God cannot be seen yet. The scriptures teach us that we will behold Him one day (1 John 3:2, 1 Corinthians 13:12), but we do not behold Him in all of His glory and fullness now. And while our logic, science, metaphysics and ethics may point us to the existence of God, they do not furnish a perfect vision of this God. They bring us to the threshold of divine knowledge and grace that must be received by faith. The second is this—sometimes we do not see someone or something, not because that person or thing cannot be seen, but because we are not looking in the right place. It is a fact that I cannot see Mount Robson at the moment. I have seen Mount Robson with my own eyes several times; I have photographed it; I have walked along its edges. And yet I cannot see it now because I am not in a place where the mountain can be seen. As John says: “He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him” (John 1:10-11). The gospels teach us that both kinds of invisibility can be overcome. The first through humility and faithful searching, the second through something entirely different. Through embracing the unseen. Through giving. This

second mystery is both simple and yet almost impossible to express in words. It is a mystery I believe worth staking our lives on. It is a mystery worth exploring in the New Year to come.

Though we do not see God, we paradoxically interact with God every day. Though we cannot comprehend the greatness of God, we are invited to the greatness of God and His kingdom every day. Precisely through what is not that great or what is unseen. The unseen nature of the road we walk in faith. The unseen strangers we should visit and gift. And the unseen gifts themselves—those we give and those we receive. In his book *Training in Christianity*, Søren Kierkegaard makes an interesting point about Christ—whom He calls “The Inviter”—The Inviter because Jesus invites us with his famous statement “Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest” (Matthew 11:28). Kierkegaard says: “The Inviter, therefore, is Jesus Christ in His humiliation, and He it was who uttered these words of invitation. It was not from His glory that He uttered them...The Inviter who utters these words...is the humiliated Jesus Christ, the lowly man, born of a despised maiden, His father a carpenter, His kindred people of the lowest class, the lowly man who at the same time (like pouring oil upon fire) declared that He was God” (Søren Kierkegaard, *Training in Christianity: And the Edifying Discourse Which*

“Accompanied” It. Tr. Walter Lowrie, D.D.. New York: Vintage, 2004. 32).

Christ came in humiliation, as the unseen. God came to us as the kind of people the king speaks of: “I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me” (Matthew 25:35-36).

These are not sociological or demographic labels. Jesus is not that interested in how we label people, if the gospels are to be believed. Though he uses labels such as *Samaritan, tax-collector, Pharisee, scribe*—it always to point to something deeper in society and in ourselves. Human beings are not labels and the terms of this parable are not sociological or even historical—these are practical, existential terms. These are the unseen. They can be of any background. They live in your midst. They are the inhabitants of the very places you do not visit or look into. They may or may not be rich or poor. They may or may not be discussed in the news, but it is really irrelevant whether or not the news discusses them. Christ does not seem that interested in news or in what people think of news (Luke 13:1-5). The emphasis here is on the people, on the actions, on the way of relating to who is unseen: ““Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me” (Matthew 25:40).

This is the greatness of the kingdom of heaven. It forever relates to what is unseen or neglected in the world. It forever invites as the Inviter invites. Greatness is a difficult word. It is a badly abused concept in two ways. The first is to use it politically or culturally, to glorify things that have nothing to do with the kingdom of heaven and everything to do with human pride and the futile quest for worldly grandeur, wealth, or power. The second abuse is to deny that greatness exists. That there is nothing great in our world, in our history, in nature, or in God. Without greatness, we are forced to be content with little-mindedness, pettiness, narrowness, ingratitude, with ephemera and minutiae—all of which can make us very miserable, fractious, selfish, violent and very lost in our personal cul-de-sacs. Jacob Burckhardt, the Swiss historian, penned the following words: “Greatness can appear at moments when mere calculation ceases and a way of thinking, a feeling, overwhelms everything. And at such moments it gives us...the impression that it carried the feeling of happiness along with it... The greatness of an epoch or a cause depends on the proportion of those capable of sacrifice, on whatever side it may be...Devotion! Where does greatness begin? With devotion to a cause, whatever it may be, with complete extinction of personal vanity...Greatness is a conjunction of a certain spirit with a certain will” (Jacob Burckhardt, *Judgments On History*

and Historians. Tr. Harry Zohn. Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1999. 33-34).

After noting some of the fractious problems of the early Church, Burckhardt goes on to say: “Charitable love in the communities and the equality before God served as uniting forces” (41). I am not sure I always follow Burckhardt’s reasoning, and I am slightly taking his words out of context, but I think there is a thread here worth following. There is no way of practicing charitable love and equality before the humiliated and unseen God without stepping out into the world to embrace the unseen road and the unseen strangers. And there is no way of stepping out into the world and embracing the unseen without the ingredients of greatness that Burckhardt mentions—devotion, sacrifice, the extinction of personal vanity. That is where the path of greatness lies. And it is a greatness that has no end.

Greatness not only sows seeds of harmony, enabling us to build in common, but it fulfills the personal and individual human spirit as well. I would suggest we look to nature, though I might be accused of the naturalistic fallacy (the very existence of which is debatable). Of all the planets in the solar system, God did not give us the largest—Earth is one of the smallest. Measuring by radius, Neptune is 3.8 times larger, Uranus 3.9 times; Saturn is 9 times larger and Jupiter is 10 times larger than Earth.

Our sun and the stars are vastly greater than Earth—the Sun is about 100 times larger. Common stars we see in the night sky are immensely larger. Vega is about 200 times larger; Aldebaran is around 400 times larger. One night of viewing and considering the distances and masses of the heavenly bodies should be enough to remind us that there is physical, actual greatness beyond our Earth. The universe seems designed to make us look beyond ourselves, to contemplate greatness. There is a greatness in history, in the fact that each and every one of us is one out of 107 billion people who have ever lived, in the fact that this coming year is one of 6,000 or more in recorded history. In some mysterious way, that greatness does not diminish us—it completes us because all of that greatness is within the greater, unseen God who made it. And without seeking out that greatness invisible, we can never really be ourselves. It is in giving that we are gifted. It is in seeking that we are found. It is in walking the unseen road that we see. There are many who do not feel God's presence or see Him at work in the world today. There are many who do not believe that He ever existed. To some degree, they may not be looking in the right place. In another sense, however, it may be because those who confess Christ as their Saviour are not interested in the harmony that comes from greatness; they are not really feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, visiting the prisons. They

have relegated such matters to economics and justice—best handled by institutions. In the parable, the king is not speaking of earthly kingdoms or their institutions. They should be just—but that is not the point of the parable. The parable is existential. It is theological. It is about your personal relationship with God and with other people. The parable is that without charity, without reaching out into the unseen—you will not give to the King nor really meet Him. God let go of His greatness to embrace us in our weakness and littleness; are we willing to let go of our littleness to embrace His greatness? A greatness of unlimited charity, unlimited grace.

The epiphany that I am want to illustrate, that I want to share with you today, is that God—especially as we know Him through Christ the Inviter—is like that young boy holding out a handful of coins. The kid nobody would play with, but who wants to be part of your life and wants you to be part of His. And it is not coins in his hand that he offers—it is just life—it is just pure, eternal and blissful life that He offers—not as a bribe, not as a catch, not as a trick to reel you in. It is just a gift. The gift of God Himself: “And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father’s only son, full of grace and truth... No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father’s heart, who has made him known” (John 1:14-18).