

Through The Looking Glass

A Message by James R. Newby

Text: Luke 22:24-27

One of the most revolutionary sentences ever spoken was when Jesus said, “I am among you as one who serves.” In these few words, we learn more about the radical upside down world of values for which Jesus stood than in any other teaching. Here we have gone through the looking glass. To quote Lewis Carroll, *“If I had a world of my own, everything would be nonsense. Nothing would be what it is, because everything would be what it isn’t. And contrary wise, what is, it wouldn’t be. And what it wouldn’t be, it would. You see?”* A Messiah who is a servant? Jesus’ words must have sounded very strange to his hearers.

A number of years ago I interviewed the former editor of Punch Magazine, and BBC Commentator, Malcolm Muggeridge. He was a writer and journalist—“A vendor of words,” he would call himself. Late in life Malcolm converted to Christianity, largely due to the influence of Mother Teresa, whom he interviewed for a BBC documentary titled, *Something Beautiful for God*. In the course of my interview, I asked him, “What recent developments within the Christian movement cause you the greatest concern?” He said, “The only way that you can really destroy the Christian faith is to abolish the words of Jesus, specifically when he

said that his Kingdom is not of this world, *and then try to prove that it is*. And this is what is happening in the Christian Church today.”

In light of Jesus’ most radical sentence, and with the backdrop of the above words of Malcolm Muggeridge, we need to ask ourselves: “What is preventing us from embracing the upside down world of values which Jesus taught and the Kingdom for which he longed?” There are many things which prevent me from such an embrace, and I know that I am not alone. To live out one’s faith and spirituality in the midst of this physical world is very difficult. And it is difficult because of the tug of war going on between the values that Jesus espouses, and the values of this world, specifically in the following areas...

The first area is the lure of materialism. We are living in a culture of abundance. With advertising becoming more and more important in our lives, we are enticed constantly to purchase the latest gadget or the newest updated version of _____(fill in the blank) America’s philosophical credo could be, “I buy, therefore I am.”

The writings of John Woolman, particularly his *Journal* and his essay *A Plea for the Poor*, have been very important in my life. This 18th century Quaker struggled with his own desires in business and making money, and the effect such business had on his inner life of faith. He writes in his *Journal* about this struggle: “The

increase of business became my burden,” he says, “for though my natural inclination was towards merchandising, yet I believed that Truth required me to live more free from outward cumbers...*I then lessened my outward business.*”

How easy Woolman makes this sound! We all have a natural inclination toward the material. And yet, when an affluent society would have us believe that happiness consists in the type of car we drive or the size of the home in which we live, the upside down world of Jesus, specifically in Luke 12, would remind us, “A person’s life consists not in the abundance of things which he or she possesses.”

(Luke 12:15)

The second area is the hunger for prestige. The human capacity for vain glory is enormous. Forever seeking recognition and approval, and in search of ways to feed our egos, we can go through this life in a continuous state of aggravation.

And ministers are no different!

A few years ago I was invited to speak in a large church in the South. I am pretty sure that I have shared this story with you before...It had quite an impact on this Quaker! The Senior Minister of this church was most gracious, and asked me to join him in his study between worship services for some coffee. As we sat down, a man in full “Waiter’s Attire” asked each of us for our order. He left, but soon returned carrying a silver tray with our coffee. He served each of us, and then exited with a bow, closing the door behind him. What the minister and I talked

about I do not remember, but I shall never forget the pastor's waiter! To be totally honest, I can easily be seduced by such a style of grandeur. Trying hard not to be judgmental, for he was a gracious host, I wondered, *how can he reconcile this style of life with his role as a servant to the servant Jesus?*

In Scripture we find many contrasting passages to the hunger for prestige... “do not become proud, but stand in awe...” “...do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly...” “Let us have no self-conceit.” “In humility count others better than yourselves...” “For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.” To understand the upside down world of Jesus is to understand what it means to live in a spirit of humility.

The final area about which I want to speak is the lust for power. Power and control over others can be most seductive. While in the desert it was a seduction through which Jesus struggled in a most agonizing way. What is it that makes the temptation to power so seemingly irresistible? Could it be because power offers the easy substitute for love? The world worships the power of prestige and control over others, as well as status, influence and money. It talks about power in terms of armaments, and the most powerful nation being the one with the most missiles and bombs. The symbols of God's power, however, are different—Jesus talked about loving enemies and how the last will be first and the first will be last. He talked about things that rub the edges of our fears and our insecurities. He talked

about loving the least powerful and the most despised—sinners, traitors, prostitutes and tax-collectors. He treated the shamed with honor and declared the unclean, clean. All of this he could do because he understood the hard task of love, and did not fall for the easy substitute of worldly power. To live in the upside down world of Jesus means to choose love over power.

Soren Kierkegaard once said that this life of ours is like a large store window in which pranksters have switched the price tags, so that the things of greatest value are priced as worthless trinkets, while cheap trash is made to appear valuable. Kierkegaard's illustration is most relevant to our confusion over values today, for often the values that we profess are in conflict with the values upon which we actually build our lives—materialism, prestige, power and control, things that contradict what Jesus taught.

And so, what constitutes failure? In the pursuit of the values of this world, this is the big question, for it identifies our greatest fear—the fear of failure. Failure, in the upside down world of Jesus, would be to set one's course in this life according to what the world expects of us, and selling one's integrity for the sake of worldly prestige, position or compensation. *Failure would be to live out one's life without ever realizing that the things that count, are the things that you cannot count, and that the values most worth having are not for sale.*

