

Through the Looking Glass

Isaiah 56:1, 6-8 | Psalm 26:1-8 | Romans 12:9-21 | Matthew 16:21-28

MATTHEW 16:21-28

²¹From that time on, Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and undergo great suffering at the hands of the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised. ²²And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him, saying, 'God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you.' ²³But he turned and said to Peter, 'Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling-block to me; for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.' ²⁴Then Jesus told his disciples, 'If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. ²⁵For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it. ²⁶For what will it profit them if they gain the whole world but forfeit their life? Or what will they give in return for their life? ²⁷For the Son of Man is to come with his angels in the glory of his Father, and then he will repay everyone for what has been done. ²⁸Truly I tell you, there are some standing here who will not taste death before they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom.'

INTRODUCTION

Charles Lutwidge Dodgson became the Rev. Charles Lutwidge Dodgson when he was ordained as a Deacon in the Church of England on December 22, 1861.¹ He served most of his adult life at Christ Church in Oxford, where he also taught mathematics. He was a fascinating man with an active imagination, writing poetry and stories and keeping journals of his prayers. When asked about his theology, he once wrote:

I believe that when you and I come to lie down for the last time, if only we can keep firm hold of the great truths Christ taught us—our own utter worthlessness and His infinite worth; and that He has brought us back to our one Father, and made us His brethren, and so brethren to one another—we shall have all we need to guide us through the shadows.²

You see, the Rev. Dodgson had an acute sense of the upside-down-ness of the world—that there was this massive chasm between what human beings should be—right, good, peaceful, in communion with God our Father—and what we actually are. He explored this theme, this upside-down-ness of the world, this persistent sense that things are not set right side up, in one of his stories. The main character enters into a world in which everything is reversed—where walking away brings you closer, text is read backwards, the right foot goes in the left shoe, and even logic itself is reversed. The Rev. Dodgson, more commonly known as Lewis Carroll, was imagining a world that was upside down and inside out—a world from through the looking glass—in order to make sense of a world that needed to be right side up.

This, friends, is really what a lot of our world feels like, I think. At least to me. Everything is somehow backwards—somehow holding contradictory things together. We are more

¹ This introduction on C.L. Dodgson was inspired by a reference to *Through the Looking Glass* in Tom Wright, *Matthew for Everyone, Part 2* (London: SPCK, 2002), 8.

² Stuart Dodgson Collingwood, *The Life and Letters of Lewis Carroll* (2013 Reprint; Boucher Press, 1898), 161. For the general background on Carroll, this volume has been invaluable.

connected than we've ever been, thanks to the technology of video chatting and a massive wireless network, and yet somehow loneliness and social dysfunction persist. We are more aware of how to prevent disease than ever before and have the most advanced medicine ever developed, and yet the world remains paralyzed by a microscopic virus. We probably have a greater awareness of justice and equality regardless of race than at any point in human history, and a segment of the population that is committed to a permanent state of protesting, and yet somehow, this week, we are adding the names of Jacob Blake, Anthony Huber, and Joseph Rosenbaum to an all-too-long list that includes Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor, George Floyd, and countless others who have given life or limb to systemic injustice and inequality.³ The world feels upside down. *Die Umwertung aller Werte*.

This, friends, is the theme we find in our Gospel reading this morning—a world that is upside down and yet somehow needs to be turned right side up. Let's take a look.

1. CHRIST THE KING MUST SUFFER

In the first part of our passage, we find Peter disagreeing with Jesus. That is, Jesus had begun teaching that he must undergo suffering and death, but Peter couldn't tolerate it. It's a section of reversals. A mere 6 verses after Peter has proclaimed Jesus the Christ and Son of God—you may remember from last week—and he's rebuking Jesus with strong words: "*God forbid it.*"⁴ It's an important moment, arguably the turning point in the Gospel. And so, we must dwell here a moment. This was no small matter that Peter had recognized Jesus as the Messiah, the anointed king, the Son of God, in that last passage. And remember what Jesus said in response: "*For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven.*"⁵ In other words, 'you didn't draw this conclusion on your own, buddy, but you got a little divine help.' And Jesus went on to tell him that he is Peter, and on this rock, the church will be built.⁶ It was an important moment. But Peter's misunderstanding of this is revealed almost immediately. In fact, he uses almost the exact opposite phrasing with Peter in this second interaction: "*for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.*"⁷ Peter may have had God reveal something to him, but he's chosen to focus on human concerns.

And what is at the heart of the disagreement? Jesus teaches that he must suffer and be killed. This is why Peter loses it. Peter challenges Jesus as though he, Peter, knows better. In Peter's mind, 'Jesus is the triumphant king—Christ the King—the Christ we see here in our window and for whom our church is named. He will overthrow the oppressors and reign in glory. He will restore the fallen kingdom occupied by outsiders. He will storm Jerusalem, not on a donkey but on the horse of a king, once again establishing the power of the kingdom of Israel.'

³ This comment is not intended to be a support of the protesting, so much as an indicator that it will take more than protesting to make a difference on this particular issue.

⁴ Matt 16:16, 22.

⁵ Matt 16:17.

⁶ This is an interesting word play. Jesus's phrasing mirrors Peter's, but Jesus takes Peter's name (Πέτρος), which means rock, and builds the phrase about the rock (πέτρα) on which the church is built. This particular play-on-words points us back to two places earlier in the Gospel: 1) those who follow and do the words of Jesus being like wise men who build houses on rock (πέτρα; see Matt 7:24-27) and 2) the rocky soil (πετρῶδης) of the *Parable of the Sower*, which falls away when trouble and persecutions arise (see Matt 13:1-23). This second reference is especially interesting because of the particular persecution that Jesus outlines to Peter (especially death) as Peter reveals himself to be the rocky soil in his rebuke of Jesus and, especially, later in his three denials (Matt 26:69-75).

⁷ Matt 16:23.

And I get it. I'm sure you do to. That's a very attractive notion of Jesus—the one who defeats our enemies and brings us peace and prosperity in this life. It's a very human understanding. People love political strongmen—even voting against their own interests to elect them.

But it's also not what Jesus came to do. He does provide a defeat, but it is of sin and death. He does provide peace, but it is peace with God. He does provide restoration, but it is of relationship with God, despite our sin, through his sacrifice. It's an upside-down world that Jesus is trying to get Peter and the disciples to see. He didn't come to win a battle, but to be defeated, so that he could win the war. He didn't come to take the lives of his enemies, but to give his own life for his enemies. He didn't come to re-establish the kingdom of Israel, but to die for the gospel of the kingdom of heaven. This is what Peter needed to understand and what we need to understand: Our Saviour secures victory through sacrifice.

But this is hard for some people to understand and to accept. They like Christian ethics, but have a hard time with the violence and death at the centre of the gospel. They like the sense of justice we preach, but find difficult the atonement and blood it requires. Or to put it differently, Jesus is a wise teacher all about love and peace, not death. But you need to remember: In our upside-down world, the gospel itself is going to look upside down. The Apostle Paul, later in his first letter to the Corinthian church, puts it like this:

But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, things that are not, to reduce to nothing things that are.⁸

It is counterintuitive, but that's the gospel. At the heart of it is the Christ, the Son of God, giving up all his rights and privileges—and life—to save those who will believe.

2. THE FOLLOWERS OF CHRIST WILL ALSO SUFFER

But of course, it's not just Jesus. You see, Jesus does not *just* save his people through his death and resurrection, but he provides the pattern for following him. *"If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it."*⁹ The world must be turned upside down for the disciples as well, for all who will follow Christ Jesus. Following Jesus is the not the comfortable path and it never has been. There is a real cost to following Jesus. And there always has been.

The life of a Christian, of one who truly understands the gospel as taught by Jesus Christ, is a sacrificial one. It's a life of one who is ready to deny themselves—that is set the needs of others above their own, to set the higher good above their own desires—and it is the life of one who is ready to even lose that very life. This, too, is very difficult for some people—even those within our faith. They suggest that 'Christianity is about affirming who we are. It's really about making us feel comfortable.' Not quite. There's very little that's comfortable about denying yourself and picking up a cross for the sake of the gospel of Jesus Christ. And I don't mean to sound apocalyptic nor to say that who you are doesn't matter. That's not what I'm

⁸ 1 Cor 1:27-28.

⁹ Matt 16:24-25.

saying at all. But rather, we need to be shaken in our world view. I need to be shaken. I need to be reminded constantly that the way of Jesus Christ, the way of the gospel, is one of selflessness, of sacrifice, of giving myself for the sake of others—not asserting my rights, but giving them up. Not asserting my privileges, but setting them aside. And not so I can earn Jesus’s approval—no I have that because he already gave his life for me—but so that I can follow him.

And, friends, I see it every day. I see it in this church. In the last week, I’ve been reminded of the countless hours one particular woman that go into making jams and chutneys for the Bazaar, and really the whole battalion of Christ Church members and friends who will rise like an army to give themselves to the Bazaar, an event that benefits the church and our mission partners. I’ve been reminded of a young professional man who has more than enough to do at his consulting job, but still finds dozens of hours each week to give to ordering our books. I’ve been reminded of another man, much later in his career, who is concerned about the financial wellbeing of the church and enquires about making an extra gift. From those who serve on the new AV team to one particular man who sets up the garden for coffee, from those serving in soup kitchens to the families who took in refugees, to so many others—this church is full of reminders that we are *not only* in this together, but we are in this for the good of others. But let’s not lose sight of the gospel behind that service. Let’s not allow the end to become the beginning, but remember the gospel, the example of Christ Jesus that is the foundation of our life and ministry. Let’s meditate on this idea, especially as we begin to look at the stewardship of creation and stewardship in general in the coming weeks.

CONCLUSION

The world we live in is upside down. And we—because of our sin—are a part of the problem. Thanks be to God for Jesus Christ, who turns the world upside down—or really, right side up—in showing us the way—not the way of the world’s strength and wisdom, but of the foolishness of the cross.¹⁰ May we follow in his footsteps, denying ourselves, and bearing our crosses. May we find the way of peace and justice, pulling our world back through the looking glass, and turning this upside-down world right side up, because our hearts have been turned right side up by Jesus Christ our Lord.

In the words of the collect of the second Sunday of Epiphany:

Almighty God, in Christ you make all things new: transform the poverty of our nature by the riches of your grace, and in the renewal of our lives, make known your heavenly glory.¹¹

Let me pray: *Heavenly Father, having found mercy from you in the death and resurrection of your Son, helps us to deny ourselves, pick up our crosses, and follow in his way. In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.*

¹⁰ See 1 Cor 1:18.

¹¹ The Archbishop’s Council 2000, *Common Worship* (London: Church House Publishing, 2000), 384.