

MOCKED FOR CHRIST - SEPTEMBER 23, 2007

As children return to the classrooms, we begin to read stories in the paper of classroom and schoolyard bullies making life miserable for other young people. Today we also have cyber space mocking and taunting as people use these new electronic means to pick on someone for whatever reason. The reason is often obscure but the effect is the same. This taunting demoralizes the person, is highly destructive and can lead to suicide for the one marked out for torture.

We are all used to having differences with people, agreeing to disagree as we live in extended families and communities. Somewhere along the line we learn that people have a right to their opinion as do we.

When we get to the point of mocking another person, we have crossed the line into personal abuse. It is one thing to disagree about some idea or issue, but it is another to get to the point of abusing the person as an individual questioning their value as a human being.

Most of us can remember times when we have felt mocked and we can remember the feeling. It is deeply personal and offensive. It causes us to question all we stand for and believe. Mockery is a powerful weapon.

Think of the early Christians who met in the dark, mocked and hated by everyone as people who were not only wrong in their faith but dangerous to the community. They were mocked for their faith in Christ and lived in fear of their neighbours. Standing up for the faith in tough circumstances is always a role for the Christian.

In the Book of the prophet Jeremiah, Jeremiah describes in chapter 8 and 9 how God is feeling mocked by his people. Jeremiah is horrified that the actions of the people of Israel so offend and hurt God. People have strayed and were becoming enamoured of the gods and the ways of the other citizens.

Hear these words of God from Jeremiah. "My grief is beyond healing, my heart is sick within me. O that my head were waters, and my eyes a fountain of tears, that I might weep day and night" And again "O that I had in the desert a wayfarers' lodging place, that I might leave my people and go away from them." Finally God says "For they are all a company of treacherous men. They bend their tongue like a bow; falsehood and not truth has grown strong in the land; for they proceed from evil to evil, and they do not know me, says the lord."

We do not think often in terms of how God feels about our actions. To Jeremiah, God appeared to be in despair. How could the people of God be so forgetful, so deliberately flaunting of all that God had done for them, deliberately flirting with money, power and influence peddling to build up their importance and ego.

Do not mock your God is Jeremiah's lesson for us.

In Psalm 79, the psalmist despairs about the mockery that Israel has become as it faced defeat. The heathen have come in and defiled the temple and thrown bodies of the people to the ravens. The psalmist says: "we have become a taunt to our neighbours, mocked and derided by those around us."

Then, in a truly human way, the psalmist asks when God is going to do something about it. Aware that the people have fallen away from God in the past, the psalmist says: "do not remember against us the iniquities of our forefathers." In other words, gloss over our weaknesses and our abuse of your love and move quickly to help us. Then he tries to get God's passion going by saying: "Why should the nations say, "Where is their God?" So, he pulls at the pride issues – do you want people to think O God that you are weak and unable to help? The psalmist ends with the promises God has heard so often before. "Then we your people will give thanks to you forever; from generation to generation we will recount your praise."

People do not change as the generations come and go. We want God to be there for us even when we drift off to other ways and take on other things which crowd out our faith. Forget about this, O God, we cry. If you assist us, we will never do this again. This is a mockery before God and we know it. Yet the ministry of Jesus, his life, death and resurrection were the proofs that God never abandons us as we abandon him. To our good fortune, God is steadfast and loyal to his creation.

Our Epistle reading was from the First Letter of Paul to Timothy.

Paul is acknowledging that Christians live in the world and not apart from it. The fact that people all around them do not accept their faith in Christ nor understand it is a reality, a true fact. Pray for those in authority over you Paul says. Offer prayers to God for those in high positions that he may work through them for good.

Paul always urges Christians to not fall into the human trap of blaming others and exhibiting their dislikes and angers. You will be mocked by many who are ignorant. You may have to pay the ultimate sacrifice of your life for your faith. Paul can not guarantee that life will be easy, anymore than it was for the Israelites in their long history as a people of God. To Paul, the world was God's even if many did not recognize or acknowledge it. Christians had to remember that God created all beings and lived in hope that all creation would one day praise and acknowledge his role.

Some argue that it is not the role of a Christian believer to attend a political gathering, but if Christians abandon the political process, who will lead us? At the very least Paul states, we should pray, with diligent sincerity, for those who lead us and who offer to serve in elected office.

The Gospel of Luke reading is the parable of the shrewd manager.

Jesus tells the parable of a manager variously characterized as shrewd and dishonest.

What is this manager really like? If he acted on the basis of only being concerned about

himself, then he is at least manipulative and deceitful, if not dishonest. If the manager recognized that people could not repay their debts, and he sought a way to get the best return for the owner and a face-saving agreement for the borrowers, then he was more than shrewd. He was compassionate and insightful.

Much of what we do is evaluated by the final outcome is it not? Perhaps we need to look at the motivation that lies behind our actions. The end does not justify the means to get there.

Jesus always stressed the importance of the little things. He constantly stressed the momentousness of seemingly trivial things: the cup of cold water, the one talent, the lost coin, the mustard seed. To Jesus, the little actions we do can bring about great things. Most of us, however, ask: "What can I do?" and because we feel we can do very little, we do nothing. We brag about the biggest buildings, the largest city, the greatest armies; we instinctively combine the word "bigger" with "better" even though there is scant evidence that larger size means more goodness.

Jesus' word has reality. Our life **is** composed of the small – small steps, small motions of the hand, small breaths. We are all small when compared to the universe. Yet our small gestures are significant. Perhaps our question should not be "What can I do?" but rather "What can I not do if I am faithful to Christ?"

What makes greatness? Jesus would say not the size of the means, but the nobility of the end. An ancient unnamed Christian writer said this: "A liar is not great, even though he may reach a throne; but a man given to truth is great, even though he may be in rags." He goes again on to ask: "What makes greatness? Not the measure of a man's body or even his mind, but his willingness to work in double yoke with Jesus."

Mocked for Christ. All of us have to be willing to face mocking as we stand firm in our faith. Those around us may not understand our motivation nor know the Lord in whom we are grounded. In Canada we do not experience this need to stand up for our faith knowing it may lead to jail or death. Many Christians around the world do face these daily fears as they seek to live out their life with integrity before the God they seek to serve.

For me, a great lesson from these readings is the pain our God endures because of our actions. We always speak of our pain and seek God to assist us to overcome it. What do we do to diminish God's pain in our relationship with our Creator? If we live as a thankful, grateful people in daily contact with the God we love, then as Christians we are honouring the God who gave us Jesus Christ and who has gone to great lengths to be with us now and always.

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