

# Excuse Me!

Jeremiah 1:4-10

16<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost

12th September 2010

The excuses that some celebrities give when they are caught red-handed are so laughable. It makes you wonder how they can really believe what they are saying.

When Paris Hilton was stopped for a minor traffic offence recently, she took some lip balm out of her purse as she was talking to the police officer. But out with the lip balm came a little bag containing a white substance. When the officer said that he thought it was cocaine, Paris replied, "Cocaine?" in seeming disbelief, "I thought it was gum."

Lindsay Lohan was also found to have cocaine in her pants pocket when stopped for a drink-driving check. "Oh," she said to the policeman, "I can explain. These aren't my pants."

Back in June, former "Party of Five" actor, Jeremy London, tried a more novel form of excuse for his drug habit. He claimed that he had been kidnapped by strangers and forced to ride around with them all night taking drugs.

Not of course that any of these celebrity excuses are new. Way back in 1987, Mick Jagger's ex-wife Jerry Hall was arrested in Barbados after being found to be carrying 20 lbs. of marijuana in her bag at the airport. No problem, she said. It's obvious the bag is not mine. I must have picked up the wrong one after coming through customs.

Two or three weeks ago, Graeme Swann, a member of England's cricket team, was stopped at 3 am in the morning on suspicion of driving under the influence. His explanation? He hadn't meant to be driving but, after having a couple of beers with his pals, he got home to find that his cats had become stuck under the floor-boards. So he had to go out and pick up some tools from a 24 hour store to get the cats out.

Some of the lamest excuses, of course, are those made by drivers when they tell police how an accident happened.

The Moving Target Excuse: "The guy was all over the place. I had to swerve a number of times before I hit him."

The Travelling Telephone Pole Excuse: "The telephone pole was approaching fast. I was attempting to veer out of its path when it struck my front end."

The Mother-In-Law Excuse: "I pulled away from the side of the road, glanced at my mother-in-law and headed over the hard shoulder into the ditch."<sup>1</sup>

In a completely different context, one of the lamest excuses I have ever heard is the one that comes from the pro-gun lobby when they trot out that tired old mantra against gun-control. "Guns don't kill people," they say, "People kill people."

When we hear this excuse, it's important to remember, of course, that guns are not neutral objects as this slogan would imply. Guns are imbued with a symbolism of power and control in our society. As such, even those held for the most innocent of purposes present, in highly-charged situations, an irresistible temptation to be used as an easy way of settling scores, righting perceived wrongs and levelling uneven playing fields.

Also when we hear this excuse, let's remember the availability of guns also empowers people to do criminal things on a scale they would not otherwise contemplate. As one writer says, "To anyone entertaining murderous impulses, a gun makes it feasible to attack larger people, multiple people, people from a distance, and from positions of secrecy. No one in their right mind would try to rob a bank with a knife. But a gun inspires confidence of success in a would-be bank robber, allowing a crime to occur when it wouldn't have otherwise."<sup>2</sup>

The Bible is, of course, no stranger to lame excuses. Jesus certainly had to deal with quite a number of them in his time. When he challenged some people to follow him, one suddenly remembered he had just purchased a field and had to go and examine it. Another had purchased five yoke of oxen and had to evaluate them. Then yet another had just married a woman and wanted to go on his honeymoon.<sup>3</sup>

One of the best excuses in the Bible is that given by Jeremiah in the passage we read today. When God asked him to become a prophet to the nations, he responded, "Lord, I don't know how to speak. I am only a child."

The context of this story is that 600-700 years before Jesus lived, God wanted Jeremiah to do a very special job – to warn the people of Israel that their idolatrous and sinful ways would lead to catastrophe for their country. He would be given the power to make prophecies about the fall of Jerusalem to the Babylonian king, Nebuchadnezzar, and about the exile of the people to that foreign land which is modern-day Iraq. But when God came knocking at Jeremiah's door, he pulled out the youth card. "I am only a child," he pled, with the implication, "Look for someone more qualified and experienced."<sup>4</sup>

But God persisted with Jeremiah. He would not let him off but told him that he had chosen him for this task before he was born. So he was to go to the people and say what the Lord commanded. "Don't use the 'I am only' excuse. It won't work with me."

Now, we Christians today are good at giving the lamest of excuses why we cannot do something or other for the cause of Jesus Christ. I am sure there is much

laughter in heaven at some of the feeble reasons we think will convince the Almighty of our inability to serve. But the excuses that do the most harm to the cause of Christ and his church are the I-am-only ones. I can't do what you ask, Lord, for "I am only a young person ... only an ordinary believer ... only have a grade 12 education ... only a newcomer to the congregation ... only became a Christian later in life ... only a member of a minority group... only have limited time ... only an old person ... only am a person with a disability."

The work of Thomas Barnardo is well known here in Canada. In Peterborough we even have a street named after him. Barnardo was born in Dublin in 1845 to a very poor family. He was a problem child in school and received little education. At the age of 16 he became a Christian which changed his outlook and goals in life. He went to London to gain a medical degree and while there began working with homeless children living on the streets and rooftops of the city, finding them shelter. In 1870, he opened his first children's home, feeding, clothing and educating the destitute. No-one was turned away. Hundreds were placed with families in Britain and in Canada. By the time of his death in 1905, 60,000 children had been helped by his homes – and all this while raising 7 children of his own, one of whom had Down's Syndrome.

The amazing thing is that Barnardo achieved all this while coming from the very humblest and most deprived of all beginnings. He could easily have used the I-am-only excuse. He could easily have said "I am only a poor Irishman ... I am only a young medical student with no experience of helping the homeless... I am only a young father with a family of my own to look after." But he didn't use the "I-am-only" excuse. Consequently, look what God achieved through him for humanity and the cause of Christ!<sup>5</sup>

What about us today? I get the feeling that God is so eager to work through us in today's world but he is limited by the resistance we put up. He wants to use us as his instruments for change but we constantly throw obstacles in his way in the form of the excuses we devise.

Let's think about that in terms of our church. In terms of our community. In terms of our society. If only we were willing, like Jeremiah, like Thomas Barnardo, and like so many other faithful Christians, to co-operate with our Heavenly Father, to work with him, to be a partner in his great cause, to commit ourselves unconditionally to his service, without excuse of any kind, just think how much more God could achieve through us to transform the lives of those around us and to make his world a better place and to advance his Kingdom

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<sup>1</sup> "Funny Auto Insurance Claim Excuses", InnocentEnglish.com, <http://www.innocentenglish.com/funny-bloopers-mistakes-quotes/insurance-claims.html>  
<sup>2</sup> Steve Kangas, "The Long FAQ on Liberalism", <http://www.huppi.com/kangaroo/LiberalFAQ.htm#Backgunskill>  
<sup>3</sup> Luke 14  
<sup>4</sup> Jeremiah 1: 4ff  
<sup>5</sup> Thomas John Barnardo, www.wikipedia.com ; King Duncan, "I am only", [www.eSermons.com](http://www.eSermons.com)