

Just Deserts

Matthew 9:9-13; Mark 10:35-45

8th Sunday after Epiphany

27 February 2011

As the political turmoil in Libya has developed and deepened this week, terrible though it is, I can't help but reflect on the sweet irony of certain aspects of that situation. Amidst Gadaffi's rant against protesters being on hallucogenics and the desperate plight of the foreign nationals clamouring to leave, I found a couple of intriguing thoughts coming to mind.

Abdel Basset al-Megrahi. The Libyan intelligence agent convicted of the bombing of Pan Am 103 over Lockerbie, subsequently jailed in Scotland, then the centre of an on-going controversy after being released and allowed to return to Libya. With all the troubles in his home country, I'll bet he now wishes he was back in his jail cell in quiet, peaceful Greenock, outside Glasgow watching the Rangers-Celtic soccer match on TV instead of the violent clashes on the streets of Tripoli, outside his hospital.

Another thought. Isn't it strange that the one of the most significant fights for democracy in the Arab world is taking place in the very same country as one of the most pivotal campaigns for democracy in the wider world so many years ago? The war in North Africa, centering on famous Libyan towns and cities such as Tobruk and Benghazi, between the forces of Rommel and Montgomery, were crucial in the war to defeat dictators such as Hitler and Mussolini and protect the democratic way of life in the western world back in the 1940s.

It's also amazing to think that this whole crisis in the Middle East today was precipitated by a slap across the face in Tunisia. Seemingly, on December 17 last year, in a rural town on the shores of the Mediterranean, a female police inspector grabbed some fruit from street vendor Mohamed Bouzizi's cart. When the young man resisted, she scattered his fruit on the ground, slapped him on the face, spat at him and confiscated his electronic scales. Unable to make a living without the scales and unwilling to bear Tunisian society's systemic corruption one moment longer, the young vendor finally snapped and ended up tragically committing suicide in front of the governor's palace. Amazing to think that such a seemingly trivial incident would have led to such a firestorm of protest in so many different countries throughout the region.¹

Obviously, of course, the incident in Tunisia was just the straw that broke the camel's back. Underneath the surface, so much bitterness and resentment has been growing throughout the Arab world as people there have become increasingly aware of better living conditions in other countries. They must also have become extremely jealous of the fact that people in the western countries have such a great say in the running of their countries while they have next to none.

One feature of the various dictatorships, highlighted during this recent crisis that has really angered people of their respective countries, has been the deserving mind-set among the many Arab presidents, from Tunisia to Egypt to Libya to Bahrain to Yemen. It's that air, that attitude, that ingrained belief that they deserve to be the rulers, that they deserve to wield autocratic power – because they are who they are, or the family to which they belong, or the elite of which they are part, or because they are the only ones with enough intelligence, or with the right political connections at home and abroad, or because they believe that they are the chosen ones of Allah who rule by divine right.

By the by, no doubt there are those who would say you don't need to go to an Arab country to see this kind of deserving mentality among the ruling classes. That you can see it right here in Canada. That there are those, even in this most politically enlightened of all countries, who are firmly convinced that they alone are the chosen ones for leadership. That they alone have the right to wield governmental power. That they alone have the ability. That they alone have the right connections. That they alone have the pedigree to occupy the high places of leadership, to be premiers, ministers and prime ministers. But then, of course, only stupid people would say such things in such a bastion of democracy, wouldn't they? And then they would only be joking ... Or, are they?

There were, of course, those back in New Testament times who also had this ingrained sense of entitlement. The Pharisees, of course, belonged to that class of people who regarded themselves as deserving because they were righteous Jews and meticulously kept all the laws of the Torah. They felt they were deserving because they believed they worshipped the only true God and could trace their lineage right back to the ancient patriarch, Abraham.²

One can readily see this deserving attitude surfacing in that passage we read earlier about the call of Matthew to be a disciple.³ The Pharisees were outraged that Jesus would even consider such a man. What right did he have to keep company with tax collectors and other outcasts, inviting them to share a meal at their table, they complained to each other. They are non-entities. Nobodies. Lowlifes. We are the important people. We are God's chosen ones. We are the ones worthy of recognition. Not them.

The theme of entitlement actually runs right through the Gospels. Think, for example, about the Elder Brother in the Parable of the Prodigal Son who believes that he deserves more of the father's love than his brother who blew his fortune on wine, women and song in far-off places.⁴ Then there are the labourers in the vineyard who started work early and believed they deserved to be paid

more than their Johnny-come-lately comrades.⁵ Not to speak of some of the disciples who believed they deserved a special place at God's right and left hand in the coming Kingdom.⁶

Of course, what angered the Pharisees was that Jesus constantly challenged their sense of entitlement, their belief that they were especially deserving of God's presence and favour over and above all other religious orders or other members of society. Constantly, he reminded them that believing themselves to be deserving – for whatever reason – would not get them anywhere with him. Time and again, he hammered home the message that the old rules had been re-written and that new rules applied. Only when they would abandon any sense of entitlement and trust unconditionally in God as their heavenly Father would there be any hope for a better life and for a place in his Kingdom.

In the movie *The King's Speech*, Prince Albert, Duke of York, the future King George VI, is hampered in seeking treatment for a serious speech affliction by his consciousness of his position. He bristles when there is any encroachment on royal protocol or any breaching of the boundaries by over-familiarity on the part of commoners. When, reluctantly, at the instigation of his wife, the Duchess of York, he goes to see speech therapist, Lionel Logue, he is very upset by this brash Australian's attempt to create a relationship of equals between them. When Logue asks him his name, he replies, stiffly and formally, "Prince Albert Frederick Arthur George, Duke of York." Logue smiles and says, "Well, then, I'll just call you 'Bertie'." Bertie, of course, being the pet name that only the Prince's inner circle was ever allowed to use.

It takes some time, of course, for this social barrier between the two men to be broken down. But when it does, when the future king finally dispenses with that sense of entitlement to special treatment that comes with royal birth, when the relationship between the two men is established as being on an equal footing, then huge progress is made and the Duke of York is finally able to overcome his vocal impediment and make the rousing and inspiring speech he needs to make as he leads the people of Britain and the Empire (now the Commonwealth) into a time of war.⁷

Ah, yes, great things can be achieved when people drop their sense of entitlement, their deserving mind-set. And nowhere is this more true than in the Christian context. Don't we Christians so often feel we are more deserving than others in our society today because the tenets of our faith are so fundamental to our Canadian way of life? Don't we believe our voice deserves to be heard over others because Christianity has for so long been the dominant religion of our country?

Now to a certain extent this is true, Christianity does have a unique place in our country's history and society, a place that demands respect. But we also have to recognise that this uniqueness has bred a culture of entitlement among Christians that is neither good nor healthy. The result being that we have come to adopt a very passive approach to our Christian faith and an overly laissez-faire attitude to the

church and its mission in our society.

It's no wonder, therefore, that we are losing the battle to attract people into our fellowship, or failing to grow as churches. Because we have that entrenched mental attitude that says: No matter what we do or don't do, we are going to win in the end. After all, we are Christians. God's chosen ones. We deserve to succeed because of who we are. Because of our connections. Because of our track record. We don't need to do anything because the result is a foregone conclusion. Though things might look bad at the moment, Christianity will ultimately succeed and the church will ultimately survive no matter what we do.

Maybe so. But the reality is that Christianity will only again become a force to be reckoned with in our times, and the church will only become vibrantly alive again, when every Christian and every church member such as ourselves, rejects the culture of entitlement that has rendered us so passively lifeless in recent times. Instead of thinking that everything will be handed to us because we deserve it, we must deliberately and proactively take personal responsibility for advancing the cause of Jesus Christ in whatever way we can.

How can we do this as Christians? By acting in the way Jesus Christ would have us act. By doing the right rather than the expedient thing. By ensuring that justice is done even in the smallest of ways. By practising unconditional love and forgiveness to the most unloving and unforgiving. By living the sacrificial rather than the comfortable life. By lighting the fire of faith wherever there is opportunity. By speaking well of the church even when it is not doing well. By making every effort to further the church's mission in the world and in our community. By embracing fresh ways of attracting newcomers to our church. By opening our minds to unconventional ideas for church worship.

In these, and in so many other ways, as we abandon any sense of entitlement, any assumption that God will bless us and our church because we are in some way deserving – and, as we actively and proactively do those things that Christ would have us do, let's be assured that his Kingdom will grow and prosper throughout our community, our country and our world, in new and exciting ways beyond our imagining.

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¹ David Sharrock, Jack Shenker, Paul Harris, "Egypt: how the people span the wheel of their country's history", *The Guardian*, www.guardian.co.uk, Saturday 12 February 2011.

² Luke 3:8

³ Matthew 9:9-13

⁴ Luke 15:11ff

⁵ Matthew 20:1-16

⁶ Mark 10:35ff

⁷ *The King's Speech*, Director: Tom Hooper; Writer: David Seidler; Starring Colin Firth, Geoffrey Rush and Helena Bonham Carter, Bedlam Productions, 2010