

Rule Revision

Mark 8:31 -9:1

4th Sunday in Lent

14th March 2010

An eleven year old little girl visited Scarborough, Ontario, this past week and was greeted by hundreds of young fans wanting to meet her and get her autograph. Was she a pop singer? The new Avril Lavigne, perhaps? Usually, the kind of young celebrities that kids go crazy over are rock stars. But not this young lady. She is, in fact, at her tender age, a wildlife documentary presenter and the host of an extremely popular show on the Discovery Kids television channel, as well as being the leading actress in the new movie *Free Willy 4: Escape from Pirate's Cove*. Her name is Bindi Irwin and you probably remember her father better. Steve Irwin. The brash Australian known as The Crocodile Hunter who was killed in an accident with a stingray back in 2006. His daughter has vowed to carry forward his legacy and has already made quite a name for herself.¹

On his TV programmes, Steve Irwin proved himself over and over again to be a consummate entertainer. Constantly living on the edge, taking risks, going to extremes – and often going over the top – to bring rarely-seen reptiles to the television screen.

In one show, shot in the remote Australian outback, he lured a particularly fearsome-looking snake from its hiding place in a cave only to be bitten by it. Rushing back to his Landrover, he exclaimed to the camera that this was one of the six most poisonous snakes in the country. Its venom, he said breathlessly, could kill a grown man in 30 minutes and there was only a 1 in 100 chance he had the antidote with him. Reaching his vehicle, he leafed through a huge reference book of reptiles, desperately trying to make a positive identification of this particular snake. Finally, he reached the appropriate page, scanned down it. Then, with a puckish little smile to the camera, he announced, “Thank goodness! This little “Sheila” is a rare non-venomous variety of this species. I think I’m going to live!”²

Steve Irwin, though, was not just a showman. He was a committed environmentalist and conservationist who had the unique gift of challenging traditional perceptions and prejudices

concerning reptiles. He had the ability to get people to see the most feared living things on the planet in completely new ways. Perhaps he might not have been successful in getting us to love such creatures as he did, but he certainly helped us come to an entirely new appreciation of their place in the natural scheme of things.

Now, if we recognise how a Steve Irwin challenged the world’s view of reptiles, or, say, a Bill Gates challenged the world’s view of computers, or an Alexander Graham Bell challenged the world’s view of communication, or an Einstein challenged the world’s view of the nature of energy and gravity, or a Charles Darwin challenged the world’s view of creation and evolution, then we can readily understand how much more radically Jesus of Nazareth challenged the people of his time to change their view of life itself. To revise their perception of the basic values of everyday existence. Values affecting giving and getting. Money and material goods. Success and failure. Social and business relationships. Prayer and spirituality.

In our reading from Mark’s Gospel today³, we find Jesus challenging contemporary preconceptions that self-promotion, self-indulgence and self-centredness are the key to living a successful life. Rather than finding happiness in pursuing such things, he tells his hearers, the secret of abundant life is to deny themselves. “For those who want to save their life will lose it and those who lose their life for my sake and the Gospel’s will save it.”⁴ In those few words, Jesus challenges people to accept a completely revised set of values, a new way of doing things, a break with tradition. More than anything, he demands that they live by a completely new set of rules.

Queen Victoria once held a banquet in London where the guest of honour was an Indonesian tribal chieftain. At the end of the meal, finger bowls were brought to the table. The eminent guest had no idea of the purpose of a finger bowl so he took it in his hands, lifted it to his mouth, and drank its contents – down to the very last drop! For a moment there was a breathless silence among the British upper

crust. Then people began to whisper to one another about this terrible breach of etiquette. All that stopped when Queen Victoria silently took her finger bowl, lifted it to her mouth and drank its contents – which meant that 500 lords and ladies suddenly found themselves in a position of having to follow suit and drink their own finger bowls. By royal prerogative, the monarch had changed the rules and her subjects were challenged to do likewise.⁵

Today, in something of the same way, Jesus Christ challenges his followers to accept his new rules. The new rules that say the way of the spirit is more important than the way of the world. The new rules that say we have to lose our lives if we want to find true life. That say we should go the second mile rather than do as little to help others as we can get away with. That say we should not take revenge even when entitled to. That say we should reach across ethnic, gender and socio-economic barriers in an inclusive, loving and accepting spirit.⁶

Spelled out in more practical ways, these new rules say that we should spend time with that lonely old woman when we would rather put our feet up at home. That we should volunteer to drive cancer patients to appointments when we would rather be out on the golf course. That say we should give to the cause of Christ when we really can't afford it. That say we should speak the word of forgiveness when we would rather lash out in anger.

It's not easy, of course, to live life according to these new rules. But the more we live in Christ's presence day by day, the greater we feel the need to live by his rules. It's almost as if our conscience won't allow us to do otherwise.

Author and preacher, Robert Salzgeber, tells a story of a group of soldiers in northern France during World War II who had become separated from their platoon during a fierce battle to retake a local village. The village was finally recaptured but in the process one of their fellow soldiers was killed. The small motley group of men carried their dead comrade to the nearby village church. They sought out the pastor in order to ask him if he would grant permission to allow their friend to be buried in the church cemetery. The pastor asked the others if they knew if their dead friend had been baptised. They said that they did not know. The others explained to the pastor that they had talked a lot about life and death and God, but one subject they

had not broached was if and when their comrade was baptised. "Well then," explained the pastor, "if you do not know if your friend was baptised I must inform you that church (law) does not permit you to bury your dead friend in this cemetery."

Saddened by this news, the men carried the body to the edge of the cemetery and buried it on the other side of the fence.

The next morning the small rag-tag army walked over to the field near the church cemetery to check the grave of their friend to make sure it hadn't been disturbed. They were all startled and disturbed when, after looking for quite some time, they could not find the fresh grave in the field. Just as they were about to give up in utter frustration the pastor approached them and said, "You cannot find the grave because it is not there where you are looking for it. Yesterday, I felt really guilty after telling you that you could not bury your friend here in the cemetery. So I woke up very early this morning and moved the fence so that your comrade is now included in the church cemetery."⁷

Now, tough though it may be to follow Christ's new rules, the bottom line is that we can only square things with our conscience when we do so. Even more, we can only really find true happiness when we accept our Master's radical call for change. Because true happiness only comes when we start losing our life, rather than saving it. True happiness only comes when we practise the values of Christ rather than those of the world.

Writer, Philip Yancey, tells how he divides the wide range of people he has met into roughly two types: the Stars and the Servants. About the Stars - the football greats, famous authors, TV personalities – he says, "These idols are as miserable a group of people as I have ever met. They have more troubled marriages, tormented psyches and incurable self-doubts than most. The Servants, on the other hand - relief workers in Bangladesh or [missionaries] scattered through the jungles of South America translating the Bible into obscure languages - are the favoured ones. I was prepared to honour and admire these servants as inspiring examples. I was not, however, prepared to envy them. But, as I now reflect on the two groups, the Servants clearly emerge as the favoured ones, the graced ones. They work for low pay, long hours, and no applause, seemingly 'wasting' their talents among the poor and the uneducated. Somehow, in the process of losing their lives, they

have found them.”⁸

Now, though our Christian calling may not lead us into the distant depths of the developing world, yet the same holds true wherever we find ourselves in life. Like these servants, we also can only find true happiness, genuine peace and satisfaction, when we follow the new rules of Christ. When we lose our lives. When we give without counting the cost. When we serve without thought of reward.

The new rules with which Jesus challenges us may be hard to accept but, when we do, what riches of heart and mind and soul they bring with them!

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¹ Brendan Kennedy, “Crocodile Hunter's daughter inspires students”, *The Toronto Star*, March 10, 2010,

www.thestar.com

² “Sheila” – Australian slang for a woman.

³ Mark 8:31 - 9:1

⁴ Mark 8:35

⁵ Brett Blair, www.ChristianGlobe.com, August 31, 2003

⁶ Mark 8:35; Matthew 5:41; Matthew 5:38ff

⁷ Robert L. Salzgeber “Changing The Rules”,

www.eSermons.com

⁸ Philip Yancey, “The Stars and Servants”, *Christianity Today*, February 1994