

Surprised By Grace

Matthew 20:1-16

13th Sunday after Pentecost

22 August 2010

Over the years, video surveillance cameras have caught some of the most defining moments in history.¹ We are still haunted by the images of the cold and calculating 9/11 terrorists making their way through airport security on their mission to destroy the Twin Towers and the Pentagon. Or, the haunting sights of the crew of the Challenger Shuttle prior to their date with disaster. Or, Princess Diana laughing and smiling in the elevator at the Ritz Hotel in Paris before that infamous car crash. Or, the chilling scenes of the little 2 year old boy, James Bulger, being abducted by two 10 year old boys from the Liverpool shopping centre in England before being tortured and murdered. Or, the sight of Conrad Black caught on security cameras at his Toronto offices removing boxes filled with allegedly incriminating documents.

Closed circuit TV cameras have become very much a part of our everyday life in recent times. They are to be found everywhere. On our streets. Adorning the walls of banks and business. In corner stores. At special events such as the Vancouver Olympics or the G8 and G20 summit meetings. In many ways, we truly live in the Big Brother society predicted by George Orwell many years ago in his prophetic book *Nineteen-Eighty-Four*.²

Many argue that the dangers associated with CCTV video surveillance in our towns and cities are justified because it makes our society safer. "But," as security consultant, Andy J. Thompson asks, "is CCTV video surveillance an effective tool when it comes to prosecuting criminal activity? There are many different opinions on this question," he says. "Some may point to statistics which indicate that geographical areas with a significant surveillance presence are just as likely to have criminal activity as jurisdictions with less of a presence. Others will argue that a significant CCTV presence will curb criminal behaviour and assist the authorities in collecting evidence and prosecuting crimes. As always, the truth lies somewhere in the middle of both arguments, but weighs more heavily in favour of its effectiveness in not only solving crimes but also preventing crime."³

When Evelyn and I were in Scotland in May, a young woman went missing in the centre of Edinburgh during the morning rush hour. She was on her way to work, got off a bus on Princes Street a few hundred yards from her office and then completely disappeared .. until, that is, security cameras showed her going into a food store. The cameras in the store showed exactly what she had bought. Then the next set of cameras saw her walking up the road. Yet another set of cameras picked her up as she turned the corner towards her office before

vanishing from sight. The police thought that she must have been abducted before reaching her office, bundled into a car and driven off. Then, a few days later, video from a camera located on the side of another nearby business revealed that she had actually reached her place of employment – a piece of evidence that changed the whole focus of their enquiry and led them to charge one of the woman's work-colleagues with her murder.⁴

So crimes can be solved by such video technology but the question remains: Does it actually deter crime? The debate on this issue will rage on, I think, for a very long time.

The issue of video surveillance usually brings up very serious debate on weighty matters relating to the pros and cons of crime control versus civil liberties. But hidden video cameras can also bring us a lot of good humour and put a smile on our face. The web site "You Tube" is filled with short movie clips of some of the most hilarious happenings in everyday life. If you don't know how to view You-Tube, just ask your son or daughter, grandson or grand-daughter.

If you are more traditional in your approach to the media, watch some of the re-runs of that wonderful hidden-camera TV show "Just For Laughs".⁵ It's something like the old "Candid Camera" show but dialogue-free. Members of the public react to strange and ridiculous situations they suddenly encounter in everyday life.

In one sequence, a young woman on a park bench starts scraping chewing gum off the soles of her shoes and putting it in her mouth – much to the disgust of her fellow passengers. In yet another, people visiting the zoo are suddenly confronted by a fake gorilla which charges out of the bushes. In another, an old woman walking her dog, her arm in a sling, hands passers-by a plastic bag and asks them to help pick up after her darling little canine.

One of my favourites is the driver pulled over for speeding. The police officer who gets out of his cruiser turns out to be very elderly and needs the aid of a walker. When he hobbles over to the offending car to issue the ticket, he can't find the motorist so he knocks on the back window instead of the front. The bemused reaction of the driver is something to behold!

It's always wonderful to see the spontaneous look on someone's face when something unexpected and ridiculous happens. And it's doubly wonderful when there just happens to be a hidden camera there to record the reaction.

I often wish there had been hidden video cameras in the time of the Bible. Wouldn't it have been something

to see the look on Goliath's face when the young David faces up to him with a slingshot? Or, Samson's reaction when he realised Delilah had cut off his hair. Or, the amazement of the guests at the Wedding Feast in Cana of Galilee when they realised the water had been changed into wine. Or, the wonder of the 5,000 when they saw what Jesus did with a few loaves and fishes.

Oh, if there had just been cameras there to catch the faces of those labourers in the vineyard featured in today's story from Matthew's Gospel!⁶ Especially when they were told exactly how much they were going to be paid – or not be paid – for their hard day's work out in the hot sun. Can you visualise the disgruntled “we-wuz-robbed” look on their faces? Their expressions of amazement would have been something to behold!

Just imagine, too, how wonderful it would be to capture on video the vineyard scenario if played out in the world of today's business and commerce. Oh, to see the faces of General Motors employees in Oshawa being told that temporary staff working an hour on the assembly line were to be paid the same as those who had put in a 12 hour shift! Or, wouldn't it be priceless to see the expressions on the faces of school principals being told at the beginning of term that new teachers were going to be paid on the same pay-scale as themselves? Or, how would the chief of police react when told that he and the lowliest constable would henceforth receive identical salaries?

Undoubtedly, amazement would give way to incredulity and incredulity would give way to laughter. It would all be so contradictory to long-standing and well-established principles of basic fairness and just reward.

Of course, when we pull out our biblical commentary and study the Vineyard Story, we soon discover it is not about union negotiations or pay bargaining or fair play. If we interpret it thus, we miss the point and the laugh's on us. No, Jesus used this imagination-catching story to tell us about a new order of things in his Kingdom. Says one writer, “We live in a world of tallies and accounts, of debts owed and debts paid ... boundaries and schedules, spreadsheets and book-keeping, and of hourly wages. [But] the Kingdom of God is on another dimension – one that turns our world upside down.”⁷

The Vineyard Story tells us God's Kingdom is totally unlike anything we know. It's not based on our normal ideas of fairness and even-handedness, tenure and seniority. No, the Kingdom operates on one concept and one alone. Grace. God's free and unmerited loving-kindness, tailor-made for our individual needs. As a Sunday School teacher once defined it to her pupils, “Grace is the break you get when you don't deserve it.”⁸ And, we might add, “When you least expect it.”

The Vineyard Story also tells us God's attitude towards us is that of a truly laughable grace. Grace that brings genuine joy and merriment to our souls because it

introduces such astonishing twists and turns to otherwise hopeless situations. Think of the delight the lowly chronically unemployed vineyard labourer felt when, only having worked an hour or two, suddenly found for the first time in his life he had come into some serious money. Likewise for us today, unexpectedly, out of the blue, God can transform the most dead-end and impossible situation and brings a smile where there has been sadness and despair. A smile at the greatness of God's grace.

A businessman is going bankrupt and, being so ashamed, is on the point of committing suicide but then, through prayer, unexpectedly finds a way out of his difficult situation.

A young mother cannot get through the day without a diet of alcohol and tranquillisers but then, through a church care group, suddenly finds new spiritual resources to deal with her daily life.

A middle-aged woman, suffering dreadful loneliness when her family leaves home is surprised to find new meaning in life when she joins a church support-group, and gives of her time and energy to help single mothers.

For each one, there seems no way out – until, suddenly, unforeseeably, God's liberating love breaks through the walls of their despair, transforming their situation completely. They can't prove what has happened. All they can do is laugh in wonder and delight at what God, by his surprising grace, has done so magnificently for them.

And if it happened in their lives, it can happen in yours too. Whatever that inevitable, that tragic, that impossible, that irretrievable situation you are up against today, remember that, as you go forward in faith and trust and prayer, God will, in time, surprise you with nothing less than his amazing grace. That astonishing break you get when you don't deserve it – and least expect it.

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¹ Andy J. Thomson, “CCTV Cameras – Do they Help Fight Street Crime?” www.searchwarp.com May 22, 2009

² George Orwell, “Nineteen Eighty Four”, Signet, 1963

³ Andy Thomson, Op. Cit.

⁴ Angus Howarth, “Fears grow for missing city office worker”, *The Scotsman*, 8 May 2010, www.thescotsman.com

⁵ Just for laughs, <http://www.hahaha.com>

⁶ Matthew 20:1-16

⁷ Brett Blair, “It Isn't Fair”, www.ChrtianGlobe.com, 19/09/2002

⁸ Ibid