

# Unfair Advantage

Luke 19:1-10

6<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Easter

29<sup>th</sup> May 2011

Amidst the terrible news of the tornadoes that have taken place in the southern US in the past few weeks, there was a little good news the other day. A minor miracle, in fact. 4 weeks after a series of tornadoes blew through Alabama, levelling everything in its path, a family in North Smithfield, near Birmingham, returned to their severely damaged home to sift through the debris. And what did they find on their porch but the family dog, Mason, whom they had long given up for dead. He was hiding in the garage when the storm lifted it up on April 27 and deposited it miles away. Somehow, the little terrier crawled all the way home through the wreckage of the vast area devastated by the tornado – amazingly, with two broken legs! The local animal control authorities said they had never seen anything like it. The courage and determination of the dog to get back home with no landmarks to guide him was unparalleled in their experience.<sup>1</sup>

As we watch the TV coverage of the tornadoes that have taken place over past weeks – especially the most recent one in Joplin, Missouri – it's hard to get our heads around the absolute devastation they have left in their wake. It's hard also to understand what the people involved must be feeling as they look round their communities and try to take in what has happened. We never saw what these communities looked like beforehand, but the people there can see in their mind's eye their homes, a school, a hospital, a corner store, a shopping mall. And all so quickly gone. In the blink of an eye.

Now, thankfully, of course, terrible times like these bring out the best in people. They bond people together. Neighbours help neighbours in unprecedented ways. Communities pull together to get each other through. Government leaders promise funds to rebuild. Goodwill abounds. Things are bad just now. But, in the end, of course, all will be well ... Or, will it?

Try and put yourself for a moment into this scenario. Just supposing that – God forbid – your home and community is destroyed by a devastating tornado. You are living in temporary accommodation in a community centre, desperately wondering how you are going to pick up the pieces. Suddenly, a local government official appears with the good news that you are going to be recompensed in full. Not only are you going to receive the full market value of your home but much more. The only drawback is this. Unfortunately, you will not be allowed to rebuild your home on its original site. You have to move to a completely new area because yours is to be redeveloped for commercial purposes. Not only that. To your horror, you find out that this is not a sudden, on-the-spur-of-the-moment initiative, but a plan that has been in abeyance for many years. The local

authorities have been waiting for the opportunity of just such a disaster to put their long-term urban renewal policy into operation.

A little far-fetched you might say? Surely no public authority would so callously take advantage of such adversity. Yet according to Canadian writer, Naomi Klein, such practices happen regularly around the world. In her recent book, *The Shock Doctrine – The Rise of Disaster Capitalism*, she documents how many governments and corporations do exactly this. They cynically exploit crises and calamities to their own advantage.<sup>2</sup>

New Orleans and the tsunami-ravaged countries of the Far East are prime examples, Klein says. In the aftermath of these huge natural disasters, private contractors stepped in with government collusion and unscrupulously used the unstable situation to make huge profits from national and international aid. Not to speak of Afghanistan and Iraq, where such disingenuous exploitation has long been the order of the day. In a surge of privatisation, contractors and mercenaries have come to outnumber military forces in these countries. Posing as saviours in such extreme situations, they have advanced their own business and political agenda, reaping much material reward in the process.

And this kind of exploitation happens not just in the wake of natural disasters. It's also, unfortunately, a hallmark of humanly caused disasters. The global recession of 2007, as we know, was triggered in large part by a crisis in the mortgage market where there was an oversupply of underpriced housing finance by US federal financial giants Fanny Mae and Freddy Mac. This led to a huge number of borrowers who were unable to pay their mortgages, resulting in home foreclosures and declining house prices.

Well, of course, some blamed the times in which we live, saying that such things happen periodically in contemporary fast-changing financial markets. Others blamed over-zealous mortgage companies for making excessively risky loans, urging people to buy larger homes than they could reasonably be expected to repay. Yet others blamed the lack of government regulation, alleging that financial institutions, trusted to police themselves, were not doing so adequately.

All these explanations were well within the realms of reasonable root-causes. But then it started to emerge that a large number of those in the investment banking industry and the mortgage lending financial sector had actually been betting on the housing market collapsing. The very people who had been approving the risky mortgages had actually been investing vast sums on the stock market to make a profit out of the financial ruin of low-income home-owners. They had been heartlessly exploiting those who thought for a brief moment that they could finally own a place of their own, only to have their dreams coming crashing down

around them. How could human beings do this to each other? It makes one wonder.

Thank goodness, of course, we say, people taking unfair advantage of others only happens in the wider world. Thank goodness it never happens in the kind of circles we move in. And certainly never to people like us or in families such as ours. Then, again ...

In one of the re-runs of the TV comedy *Everybody Loves Raymond*, Debra, while looking for a coupon in a drawer one day, accidentally throws out her husband's most prized possession, a personal letter from Muhammad Ali. Raymond is absolutely distraught and Debra, not wishing to own up, seeks help from her mother-in-law. Marie gallantly takes the blame for the missing letter and withstands her son's white-hot fury – for which seeming act of unstinting generosity, Debra is eternally grateful. Until, of course, the incorrigibly devious Marie turns to Debra and says, "Of course, now, my dear, you and I have an understanding and I may just have to call on you for a favour sometime in the future."<sup>3</sup>

Oh, yes, it's not just on a global level that people take unfair advantage of others. Unfortunately, there are people in our everyday lives with an uncanny ability to hone in on another person's misfortune and profit by it. Their actions are cloaked in seeming unselfishness but their motives are anything but.

Now, when you think about it, Jesus had more than ample opportunity to take unfair advantage of the many needy, disadvantaged and alienated people he encountered during his ministry. Take Zacchaeus, for instance, the diminutive tax collector who was so intent on seeing Jesus that he climbed up a tree. Here was a man going through a personal and spiritual crisis because he was hated by his fellow Jews for being a Roman lackey. Jesus could easily have used the occasion to berate him for being a collaborator and to preach an anti-Roman political stance. But no. His concern was simply for the man's well-being, sending out a message of unconditional acceptance, "Hurry down, Zacchaeus," he said, "for I must stay with you ... Salvation has come to this house today for this man is also a descendant of Abraham."<sup>4</sup>

No, Jesus never manipulated occasions of need or spiritual crisis to his own advantage. His concern was always for the other person's health, welfare and spiritual good. And we, of course, must follow Christ's example. It is so tempting to use certain situations for our own advantage. Say, when someone is in financially dire straits and we are able to lend them money. Or, when we spend a lot of time supporting a friend going through a family problem. It is so tempting to bank such occasions in exchange for future benefits and favours. But this is not the way of Jesus. His way is the way of selflessness. His way is to reject exploitative behaviour and only ever act for other people's good. His way is "to give and not to count the cost," as St. Ignatius said, "to labour and not ask for any reward."<sup>5</sup>

In his book, *The Miracle on the River Kwai*, Rev. Ernest Gordon tells about one of the Japanese World War II camps filled with Americans, Australians, Canadians and

Britons who had helped build the infamous Bridge over the River Kwai. Life in the camp had become brutal. A dog-eat-dog mentality had set in. Survival was everything. The law of the jungle prevailed. Then a big, strong Scottish soldier, Angus McGillivray, died and, as the reason for his death slowly came out, everything changed.

Some weeks before, one of Angus's closest friends in the camp was very sick and near death. Angus could so easily have turned the situation to his own advantage, claiming the man's food allowance and his blanket. But Angus made up his mind his friend would not die if he could help it. He gave him his own blanket, saying that he had just come across an extra one. He gave him most of his rations, saying that he had been able to get some extra food. But as his friend recovered, Angus collapsed and died of starvation, complicated by exhaustion. Rather than exploit the situation of his friend's illness, Angus acted in the most selfless manner possible. He acted, said Gordon, as Jesus would have acted in that same situation, giving everything, even his life.

The result of his selflessness had a startling impact. The mood of the camp began to change. The men began to focus on putting other's needs ahead of their own. They began to care for each other with a greater humanity. They began to think of ways they could keep each other's spirits up. So they formed an orchestra with home-made instruments. They began a university, a hospital, a library and even a church called "The Church Without Walls", a place of worship so powerful and so compelling that even the Japanese guards were drawn to it. The whole place was transformed almost overnight, said Gordon, and all because one man decided to live selflessly, following the example of Jesus.<sup>6</sup>

In today's world where we constantly face such great pressures to put ourselves first and turn every situation to our own advantage, let us re-affirm the way of Jesus, the way of selflessness. The way that can totally transform the world around us and change for the better how people live in it.

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<sup>1</sup> Maggy Patrick, "Dog finds his way home after Alabama tornado", ABC News, May 27, 2011

<sup>2</sup> Naomi Klein, *The Shock Doctrine – The Rise of Disaster Capitalism*, Knopf Canada, September 2007

<sup>3</sup> *Everybody Loves Raymond*, Ray Romano, Patricia Heaton, Writer: Aaron Shure; Director: Gary Halvorson, Episode 203, January 17, 2005, CBS Television

<sup>4</sup> Luke 19:1-10

<sup>5</sup> Prayer of St. Ignatius Loyola.

<sup>6</sup> Ernest Gordon, *Miracle on the River Kwai*, HarperCollins Canada, 1995. cf. Also Tim Hansel, "Holy Sweat", 1987, Word Books Publisher, pp. 146-147.