



Jesus' surprising reversals—part 2

a prophet's inspiration: of sidonian, syrian, and israelite widows and lepers

Luke 4.²³⁻³⁰

²³And he said unto them, "Ye will surely say unto me this proverb, 'Physician, heal thyself: whatsoever we have heard done in Capernaum, do also here in thy country.'" ²⁴And he said, "Verily I say unto you, No prophet is accepted in his own country. ²⁵But I tell you of a truth, many widows were in Israel in the days of Elias, when the heaven was shut up three years and six months, when great famine was throughout all the land; ²⁶but unto none of them was Elias sent, save unto Sarepta, a city of Sidon, unto a woman that was a widow. ²⁷And many lepers were in Israel in the time of Eliseus the prophet; and none of them was cleansed, saving Naaman the Syrian."

²⁸And all they in the synagogue, when they heard these things, were filled with wrath, ²⁹And rose up, and thrust him out of the city, and led him unto the brow of the hill whereon their city was built, that they might cast him down headlong. ³⁰But he passing through the midst of them went his way...

Introduction to the series

Today's homily is the second in a series of homilies entitled: "Jesus' Surprising Reversals."

This series of homilies is focused on the Gospel of Luke, as he among the Gospel writers best epitomizes this theme. Or so it seems to me.

In this series of homilies, we will examine how Jesus challenged, resisted, and—at least in his own life and ministry—reversed the world's value system, especially as it weighed and still to this day weighs, the worth of individuals, or, in the language of the Doctrine and Covenants, "the worth of souls."¹ In challenging, resisting, and reversing the world's twisted

¹ DC 18.¹⁰

value system, Jesus will surprise us by the individuals with whom he associates and the individuals whom he holds up as role models. He will also surprise us by being critical of those whom society thought of as heroic and looked to as role models. We will watch as Jesus brings a reversal of fortune to those whom he serves and a changing of the guard when it comes to role models of discipleship.

I might have named this series, “Jesus’ *Offensive* Reversals,” for his reversals often offended those who witnessed them—in word or deed. However, Jesus’ reversals as recorded by Luke were intended to do more than surprise. And they offended only to the degree that they challenged, resisted, and reversed the world’s value system, especially as it weighs the worth of individuals.

I believe, in fact, that Jesus’ challenge to and reversal of the world’s value system belongs near the top of any list concerning the purposes and objectives of his life, his teaching, and his ministry as a whole. Even more recognized and appreciated aspects of Jesus’ ministry—his healings, for example, or his teachings, or even his atoning sacrifice, death, and following resurrection, ascension, and enthronement—even these represent a challenge to and reversal of the world’s influences and values.

Jesus’ challenges to the world’s value system, however, are about more than simple ethics, as important as those are. They go beyond matters of how mortal beings conduct themselves *visa* via others while living on this terrestrial planet. His challenges are more far reaching than the temporal existence of this world. His challenges to the world’s current value systems have applications to the cosmos and how immortal beings exist and endure in the eternal realms. And, as always in Jesus’ intentions, they teach us something of the character of God, Himself.

Introduction to today’s homily

In part one of this series, we listened to Mary’s enraptured revelation of the unheard-of reversal that God intended to accomplish through her lowly son.

He hath put down the mighty from their seats,
and exalted them of low degree.
He hath filled the hungry with good things;
and the rich he hath sent empty away.²

This same spirit of reversal is found in today's texts. Those of whom Mary speaks as being of "low degree" and "hungry" are replaced in today's reading with Jesus' widowed woman from Sidon and Syrian leper, who found themselves filled and healed through faith. At the same time, Mary's "mighty" and "rich" are replaced by Jesus' Israelite widows and lepers, who found themselves empty and diseased by their unfaithfulness. In his interpretation and exposition of scripture, Jesus created a whole new class of role model. As we will see, Jesus' audience found his proposal unwelcomed. They rejected it out of hand, and violently.

a prophet's inspiration

Whatever one decides about the overall "historical chronology" of Jesus' ministry, Luke chooses to report this reversal in which Jesus creates a new class of role model as part of Jesus' first public appearance at the beginning of his earthly ministry. This points to the centrality of Jesus' work of reversal—at least as far as Luke was concerned, influenced, perhaps by Mary.

Having only recently returned from his forty-day desert fast and trial, during which, no doubt, his Father has provided confirmation and added instruction concerning his mission as revealed to Mary, Jesus attends sabbath worship services in his hometown of Nazareth. During this service, Jesus is invited to read from the synagogue's sacred scrolls. Reversal is clearly already on his mind. He reads:

"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he hath anointed me to preach the gospel to the poor;

² Luke 1.⁵²⁻⁵³

he hath sent me to heal the brokenhearted,
to preach deliverance to the captives,
and recovering of sight to the blind,
to set at liberty them that are bruised,
To preach the acceptable year of the Lord.”³

Having finished his reading, and while he had everyone’s attention, Jesus “began to say unto them, ‘this day is this scripture fulfilled in your ears.’”⁴

Jesus utilizes Isaiah’s inspiration to declare his own intentions. He has come down from heaven to serve, strengthen, protect, and reverse the fortunes of the weak, the oppressed, the vulnerable. This is not only consistent with Mary’s maternal intuition and Isaiah’s prophetic insight, but is, as we have previously reminded, consistent with Israel’s very first experience with Yahweh. It was Yahweh who saw the cruelty of Israel’s Egyptian oppressors, heard Israel’s pleas for deliverance, came down to humble the arrogant Egyptian taskmasters, set Israel free, and called the nation as an ambassador to bear witness of his redeeming character—a warning to the nations of the earth.

The same spirit that rested upon Yahweh, rests upon Jesus. The same character that occupied Deity’s bosom, occupies Jesus’. Jesus would bring about the same types of reversal of fortunes as those Yahweh had brought to Israel’s progenitors.

a new brand of role model

Luke records the congregation’s response to Jesus’ reading and his claim to possess the same spirit and calling as Yahweh.

“And all bare him witness, and wondered at the gracious words which proceeded out of

³ Luke 4.¹⁸⁻¹⁹

⁴ Luke 4.²¹

his mouth. And they said, ‘Is not this Joseph’s son?’”⁵

No doubt, Jesus’ “gracious words” left some positively impressed with the young man. But from Jesus response to the congregation, it seems that most were, at best, confused. Many were offended. And worse, many offered violent resistance. Whether the congregation was confused, offended, or resistant, Jesus issued the warning found in today’s reading.

“Be careful, you who think of yourselves as God’s chosen people, that you do not dismiss me as your ancestors dismissed Elijah and Elisha.” Jesus then presented them with role models to follow. In addition to presenting them heroes to emulate, however, he also offered them anti-heroes whose examples they were to shun.

Perhaps his audience could have stomached Jesus presenting Israelite widows and Israelite lepers as anti-heroes. The historical record was clear, after all: their Israelite forebearers were subject to error and sin. The prophet, Jeremiah, had gone so far as to declare,

“For the children of Israel and the children of Judah have only done evil before me from their youth... For this city hath been to me as a provocation of mine anger and of my fury from the day that they built it even unto this day; that I should remove it from before my face...”⁶

So, to draw lessons from Israel’s past transgressions might have been acceptable. But, as his mother well knew, Jesus’ mission called for something yet more radical. And radical he gave them. To appreciate Jesus’ radicalness, we must remind ourselves who the Sidonians/Tyrians and Syrians are.

Tyre and Sidon were ancient and prestigious Phoenician city-states that the New Testament nearly always mention in the same breath. Except for a brief interlude when Hiram, King of Tyre, cooperated with Solomon in his ambitious building projects, including that of the

⁵ Luke 4.²²

⁶ Jeremiah 32.³⁰⁻³¹

temple, the district of Tyre and Sidon was a near constant commercial competitor and military foe of Israel and Judah, especially in the Old Testament and before Roman rule. Upon Judah's defeat and destruction at the hands of the Babylonians, Tyre and Sidon had, like so many of Judah's neighbors, rubbed salt in Judah's wounds by taking advantage of Judah's plight and enriching itself through the confiscation of previously Israelite lands and oppressing Jewish refugees. So incensed was Ezekiel by Tyre and Sidon's behavior that he devoted three chapters to exalt in their collapse and destruction.⁷ While the district fell, first to the Assyrians and then the Greeks, it remained an important Roman district in Jesus' lifetime.

The nation of Syria was a centuries-long determined enemy of both the northern kingdom, Israel, and the southern kingdom of Judah, with constantly shifting boundaries between them depending on military fortunes one way or the other. Like his more famous fellow prophet, Isaiah, Amos included Syria (Damascus) in his oracles against the nations. The nation's violence against Israel's population was likened to threshing wheat. One can almost feel Syrian swords slash at and mutilate Israelite citizens—man, woman, and child. Yahweh would not forget such extreme violence.

“Thus saith the LORD;
For three transgressions of Damascus,
and for four,
I will not turn away the punishment thereof;
because they have threshed Gilead
with threshing instruments of iron:
But I will send a fire into the house of Hazael,
which shall devour the palaces of Benhadad.
I will break also the bar of Damascus,
and cut off the inhabitant from the plain of Aven,

⁷ Ezekiel 26-28

and him that holdeth the sceptre from the house of Eden:
and the people of Syria shall go into captivity unto Kir,
saith the LORD.”⁸

The point here is that for a Jew in Jesus’ time, there was nothing redeeming or redeemable about Tyre and Sidon or Syria. Worse than being irredeemable, Sidonians and Syrians were hated for their anti-Jewish past. One can see, then, that holding a Sidonian widow and Syrian leper up as role models might be thought of as over the top. “Fine. Suggest that Israelite widows and lepers could have been more faithful. But don’t you dare suggest that a Sidonian widow or Syrian leper acted better or more faithfully than an Israelite counterpart. Don’t you dare hold such creatures up as role models for all Israelites to follow!”

But this is simply Jesus being Jesus, doing what Jesus did and does. Jesus is already, at the earliest stages of his ministry, following his mother’s premonition. He could find value in the most unlikely of places and in the most unlikely of people. And he is inviting those who see and hear him to join him in thinking outside the box. He is inviting them to humble themselves as is characteristic of their God. He is inviting them to reconsider their entire twisted value system and how they estimate the worth of the individual.

Jesus’ revelation of resistance and reversal of the world’s perverted value system went over like a led balloon. How dare Jesus “apply” the scriptures in such a way as to suggest that a Sidonian female or Syrian leper were more righteous than even the lowliest of Israelites. How dare he hold up as righteous examples for “God’s elect” to follow individuals who were citizens of enemy nations. How dare he turn villains into heroes. The grotesqueness of Jesus reversal filled the congregation with anger and transformed it into a murderous mob.

This response was, of course, not only common, but simply served to prove Jesus’ point. A prophet might be without honor in his own country, but this does not change the accuracy of the prophet’s inspiration and revelation.

⁸ Amos 1.³⁻⁵

Jesus was no provincial. He could never be a misogynist or a racist or a nationalist. He could never have pledged allegiance to one flag or sworn an oath to any single religion. He could never overlook the worth of any and every soul. He could never overlook or devalue the righteous example of any individual, be they of whatever gender or race or nationality or religion.

Jesus' use of a Sidonian widow and a Syrian leper as role models even at the expense of the more "appropriate" respected and honored Israelite widow or leper is an example of the sort of reversal of fortune and worth that his mother intuited would be central to her son's divine call and purpose. This divine largesse would not only be cause for his early rejection at Nazareth, but it would be foundational and instrumental in his ultimate murder on a cross. But, Jesus intended to turn the world on its head no matter its consequence to himself. He would sacrifice himself in order to reveal the truth and save an inside out world.

Today is as good a time as any to follow Jesus' example of high open mindedness. It is as good a time as any to follow examples of goodness and rightness wherever they may be found. It is as good a time as any to acknowledge that even our enemy can possess a righteousness that we lack. Today is as good a time as any to acknowledge that we are of no more or less worth than anyone else. Such awareness does not diminish us, it exalts us and turns us into the true children of God.

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!