

ARE YOU EVER SO NEAR BUT NEVER THERE?

Today's Text: John 12: 37- 50

Extracts:

But although He had done so many signs before them, they did not believe Him, that the word of Isaiah the prophet might be fulfilled, which he spoke: “Lord, who has believed our report? And to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed?” Therefore they could not believe, because Isaiah said again: “He has blinded their eyes and hardened their hearts, lest they should see with their eyes, lest they should understand with their hearts and turn, so that I should heal them.” ...Nevertheless even among the rulers many believed in Him, but because of the Pharisees, they did not confess Him, lest they should be put out of the synagogue; for they loved the praise of men more than the praise of God [Jn 12: 37-43]

Zach Powers, aged 6, is the grandson of Charles Henderson, 47, who lives in Haverhill, Massachusetts, USA.¹ Grandpa suffered from hypoglycemia, the medical condition of having an unusually low level of sugar in the blood. So, from early enough, grandma taught Zach what to do should his grandpa need emergency care in her absence. On the fateful day of Saturday, August 20, 2011, Zach was alone with grandpa. They played some golf and thereafter went shopping. But as soon as they returned home, grandpa slumped and became unconscious. Zack knew what to do. He called 911 and gave clear directions on how to reach their house. He was at the door to open for 911 officials whom he told that grandpa “had to use needles every day.” Grandpa was rushed to a nearby hospital where he was expected to make full recovery.

Zach was a remarkable kid. He had listened to grandma's instructions, understood them well and clinically executed them when the need arose. What if he had pretended to know what to do only to be handicapped when the right moment arrived? Unfortunately, most of us fall into the latter category. We claim to have been believers for donkey years. We know all the “tricks” of praying and fasting. We wear the biggest garments in our church assemblies. Yet, when true worshippers are required in a spiritual emergency, we are found wanting! The truth is that we are hardly what we make others believe we are. Why are we ever so near but never there? In this week's Bible text, Jesus faced a similar situation during His days on earth with rulers and worshippers. Let us find out what we can learn from the story for our modern assemblies.

¹ Based on Pat Prescott, “6-Year-Old Boy Calls 911 After Grandfather Collapses,” <http://www.newsoxy.com/world/6-year-old-911-30045.html> ; Sept. 6, 2011.

1. Background: Are you too deaf or God is too loud?

Let us take our minds back to the early days of the children of Israel in the wilderness as recorded in the 19th and 20th Chapters of the book of Exodus. It was in the third month of their departure from Egypt and they were camped before Mount Sinai. Moses went up to God on the mountain. The Lord called to him there and said to him, “Thus you shall say to the house of Jacob, and tell the children of Israel: ‘You have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles’ wings and brought you to Myself. Now therefore, *if you will indeed obey My voice and keep My covenant, then you shall be a special treasure to Me above all people; for all the earth is Mine. And you shall be to Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.*” When Moses relayed the message to the people, they told him, “All that the Lord has spoken we will do” [Ex. 19: 1-8]. But when the moment came and God’s voice thundered the Ten Commandments to the hearing of the congregation, they trembled and stood afar off, saying to Moses, “You speak with us, and we will hear; but let not God speak with us, lest we die” [Ex. 20: 18-19]. Had they suddenly become too deaf or God was too loud? In the end, the generation that heard those words never made it to the Promised Land. They had perished in the wilderness because of disobedience.

The attitude of the people in the days of Jesus on earth was not any different. After His triumphal entry into Jerusalem, Jesus made it clear to the Jewish rulers and His other listeners that the time for His crucifixion had arrived, “that the Son of Man should be glorified” [Jn 12: 1-23]. As He spoke, He asked His Father to glorify His name to the people’s hearing and a voice came from heaven, saying, “I have both glorified it and will glorify it again.” But did His listeners believe that? No! Some said that it had thundered while others said it was an angel that spoke to Him! So, in spite of all the wonderful signs that He had performed before them, they still did not believe in Him [vv. 24-37].

Like the children of Israel in the wilderness, believers in Christ have been called “a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, [God’s] own special people” so that they may proclaim His praises who has called them out of darkness into His marvellous light [1 Pet. 2: 9]. But have we arrived there or are we perpetually on the way? What is it that prevents us from walking our talk? Are we too deaf to hear and obey God’s voice or is His voice too loud that He has made us nervous? That brings us to this week’s Bible text from which we can find answers to both questions as follows:

a) *God has blinded some eyes and hardened some hearts!*

Quoting the prophet Isaiah [Is. 53:1& 6: 9-10], Jesus provides the answer why some people cannot accept the truth of Christ as the Son of God: it is because God has blinded their eyes and hardened their hearts. Therefore, they may look but cannot see; they may hear but cannot

understand. Consequently, their hearts cannot be turned to the truth and they cannot be healed [Jn 12: 38-40]. How can that be?

There are some people who do not want to hear anything about Jesus. I am not talking about non-Christians, such as Judaists or Muslims or Hindus. I am talking about so-called Christians! They could be top ranking priests, pastors and officials or ordinary folks. They could be quite versed in the rituals and doctrines of their denominations. But they have ***a rebellious spirit which does not want to hear the truth if it will make them surrender their self-will to the will of God.*** Jesus has said of such people, “Why do you call Me ‘Lord, Lord,’ and not do the things which I say?” [Lk 6: 46].

Some people will not hesitate to tell others that they are ‘pastors’ or ‘evangelists’ or ‘reverends.’ Indeed, they are because they have received water baptism and may minister the Sacraments to their congregations. But they may be sexual perverts who are ravaging the altar boys or choir girls in their churches. They may be high class white-collar robbers who are stealing big time in their places of work or making away with the treasury of the church without any authority! Writing to the Corinthian church, Paul warned them not to keep company with anyone “named a brother, who is sexually immoral, or covetous, or an idolater, or a reviler, or a drunkard, or an extortioner- not even to eat with such a person” [1 Cor. 5: 9-11]. Today, such people may be in the majority in some places of worship! So, if God warns such people and they refuse to repent, then, their eyes have been blinded and their hearts have been hardened. They are ***reprobate minds*** [Rom. 1: 28] that ***can NEVER accept Christ in spirit and in truth.***

- b) *Some people fear to lose political power/status in their place of worship!*

We are told that there were many rulers in Israel in the time of Jesus that believed in Him “but because of the Pharisees they did not confess Him, lest they should be put out of the synagogue” [Jn 12: 42]. One of such rulers, Nicodemus, for example, came to Jesus by night [Jn 3: 1], perhaps the only time he was bold enough to do so! The parents of the man born blind were not bold enough to attest that Jesus had healed their son “because they feared the Jews, for the Jews had agreed that if anyone confessed that [Jesus] was Christ, he would be put out of the synagogue” [Jn 9: 22].

Truth is not user-friendly but God-fearing. Your church can enhance your political stature but not your spiritual status. Your church can award you a B.A. (Bachelor of Arts) degree from its seminary or Bible College or anoint you a pastor or evangelist but it cannot make you a

b.a. (born-again) because only the Holy Spirit can grant that, and no one can say that Jesus is Lord except by the Holy Spirit [1 Cor. 12: 3] Therefore, if for ephemeral gains, you fear your pastor or priest more than God, you are ever so near but may never get there!

c) *Some people love the praise of men more than the praise of God!*

Both within and outside the church, another reason that people's hearts may be hardened against accepting Jesus is, as in the days of Jesus on earth, "they [love] the praise of men more than the praise of God" [Jn 12: 43]. To know the praise of God, you have to have the mind of Christ [1 Cor. 2: 16] because God looks at the heart while men look at outward appearance [1 Sam. 16:7]. What cannot be measured cannot be appreciated or understood. Consequently, we seek to impress others than to fear and please God. That is why most of us are hypocrites! We are only pretending to be what we are not.

Unfortunately for *people-pleasers*, they *can never satisfy others nor be satisfied because they are pursuing a moving target*. The Joneses that they are pursuing are also pursuing the Joneses ahead of them. Why do you think that all the people going in the same direction are going to the same destination? That is why the fear of man brings a snare [Prov. 29: 25].

In sum, it is futile to try to please God and the world at the same time [Matt. 6: 24]. You are either for Christ or you are not. There is no half-way or half-measure! Otherwise, you will be ever so close to God's grace and blessings but can never have them. You may sow much and bring home little. You may eat or drink to excess but never have enough. You may be fully clothed but still find no warmth. You may earn wages and it will seem like you have put them in a bag with holes. That is because the temple of God (within you) lies in ruins [Hagg. 1: 3-6]. *So, why then do you come to church at all if God is not the centre and object of your worship?*

2. Breaking through the threshold

According to an African proverb, a dwarf and a child may be of the same height but they are not of the same age! Your long years of being a Christian count for nothing if your spiritual growth remains stunted or arrested at the threshold of total surrender to God's will for your life. Your high rank in your church becomes an embarrassment when your integrity is questionable. What will it take for you to cross the Rubicon and let Christ flow through your veins? Here are the tell-tale signs of where you may be on the road to full knowledge of Christ:

a) *You may only be a commuter right now!*

Some people only behave like Christians on Sunday but are people of the world for the rest of the week. Such people can be called commuters. A commuter lives in one part of town, some time a poorer neighbourhood, and works in another and more prosperous part, invariably using public transport. S(he) is motivated by worldly necessities, such as employment or business. Therefore, ***the commuter only has permanent interests, not permanent friends.***

Take the example of the crowds that followed Jesus after He had miraculously fed five thousand men. When they returned to Tiberias near the spot where He had fed them, they could not find Him there. So, they took boats and came to Capernaum on the other side of the Sea of Galilee. There they met Him and Jesus said to them, “You seek Me, not because you saw the signs, but because you ate of the loaves and were filled” [Jn 6: 24-26].

When you are only in church for material blessings, you are a commuter. Listen to what Jesus has told commuters, “Do not labour for the food which perishes, but for the food which endures to everlasting life, which the Son of Man will give you.” So, all you need to do so as to do the works of God is to believe in Jesus whom His Father has sent [vv. 27-29]. Jesus will take you past the threshold to your fullness in God His Father.

b) *Or you are simply a tourist!*

A tourist is a traveller who visits places of interest for maximum fun or pleasure. That is why tourists have to be motivated with price discounts and enhanced facilities. In like manner, some people only attend churches that have tourist attractions, such as popularity, where they can meet attractive men/women or influential people, or where they can hear good music. Some go to churches where they can have it their own way. For example, in such places of worship, they may hardly preach against sins or encourage worshippers there to repent or ask for forgiveness.

You are a tourist if you show little or no commitment to your relationship with Christ. ***You are a tourist if you are a mere church goer who has not received water baptism nor received Christ in his heart.*** You may have made multiple pilgrimages to Israel to see the holy sites. You may know all the verses of the Bible from memory. But if there is no change in your conduct, you are a mere tourist. You may serve on important committees and donate huge sums of money to your church but if you do not know Christ, you are a mere tourist. Therefore, you may need to heed the words of the apostle Peter who has begged “sojourners and pilgrims” to abstain from fleshy lusts that war against the soul, having their conduct among unbelievers honourable so that

they can be seen for their good works, not evil doing, that they can “glorify God in the day of visitation” [1 Pet. 2: 11-12].

c) *Or you are still a permanent resident*

Some people can claim to be Christians of long standing. They may receive the Holy Communion as often as it is available. They are respected members of the community, both in their place of worship and where they live and work. But if you scratch the surface, you may find that they are not truly born again. For example, the rich young man who came to Jesus to ask what he needed to do to gain eternal life had kept the Ten Commandments from his youth. Yet, he still carried idolatry in his heart because he could not part with his great possessions when Jesus challenged him to sell all he had and give to the poor [Matt. 19: 16-23]. Such people can be called permanent residents.

A permanent resident (such as the American Green Card holder) *may enjoy many privileges that a citizen has but s(he) cannot vote or be voted for in his/her country of residence.* So, why should you call yourself a believer and yet cannot face Christ’s judgment seat? As Jesus has made it quite clear to Nicodemus, unless a man is born again of water and the Holy Spirit, he can neither see nor enter the Kingdom of God [Jn 3: 3, 5]. *So, why not go all the way and become a citizen?* The Psalmist says, “I am a stranger in the earth” [Ps. 119: 19]. Can you say that of yourself?

From the forgoing analysis, we can conclude that *only citizens and ambassadors have reached there! They are those who believe in Jesus and in Him who sent Him* [Jn 12: 44]. That means that you obey ALL that He has commanded you. As a citizen of heaven [Phil. 3: 20], you hold God’s “passport” that entitles you to call Him “Abba, Father” and a “joint heir” with Christ [Rom. 8: 15, 17].

3. Conclusion: Get there for a change!

The night is far spent, the day is at hand. Therefore, cast off your works of darkness and put on the armour of light. Walk no longer in revelry and drunkenness, lewdness and lust or strife and envy. Instead, put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to fulfil its lust [Rom. 13: 12-14].

As long as you are still on earth, you remain Christ’s ambassador [2 Cor. 5: 20], which should grant you diplomatic immunity against all the wiles of Satan. You have crossed the threshold. You have finally reached there! You can say like Paul in the evening of his life, “I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith” [2 Tim. 4: 7].

You have already come a long way. Get there for a change!