

Counting Followers

‘The dictator of a small country was bitterly disappointed that nobody would use the newly issued postage stamps bearing his portrait. He questioned his postmaster [general], who explained that the stamps were not sticking. Seizing a stamp, the dictator licked it and stuck it on an envelope. “Look!” he shouted. “It sticks perfectly!” The postmaster faltered for a moment, then explained, “Well, sir, the truth is that people have been spitting on the wrong side”.’ The “moral” of the story is, just because one is rich and powerful does not necessarily mean that one is loved, or popular. We see this all the time in our day. Indeed, these days, with the advent of the internet which birthed the world of social media, many people literally live their lives on social media. Their self-worth is determined by how many followers they have, how many subscribers they have, how many “likes” and reposts their comments receive. The more popular they are, the more money they can earn from advertisers on their “channels”, the more influential their opinions become, the more “powerful” they become, and the more important, the more “great” they become as a human being. Or so they think.

The Bible calls this many things, but in today’s Gospel, John 12:43, it’s “human praise”. In verse 19, the Jewish powers-that-

be lamented: “Look, everyone has gone after Him!”. They literally said, “the world has gone after Him”. Sounds like their pride was wounded. They were jealous. They wanted to be the most popular. Did not Lord Jesus describe them in Luke 20:46 and elsewhere? “Beware of these teachers of religious law! For they like to parade around in flowing robes and love to receive respectful greetings as they walk in the marketplaces. And how they love the seats of honor in the synagogues and the head table at banquets”. Our Lord actually warned us against being like that.

Now there is nothing wrong in being popular in and of itself. But when popularity, worldly praise, is the aim and goal of life, then that life will be very bitter and tragic. We can all be lured into this trap of popularity. Like I said, there’s nothing wrong with being liked by others. After all, we are also taught in Romans 12:18: “If possible, so far as it depends on you, be at peace with all men”. But usually, popularity is accompanied by a degree of power and position. And people usually seek the “praise of men”, rather than the “praise of God”. We see this clearly in John 12:42-43: “Many people did believe in Him, however, including some of the Jewish leaders. But they wouldn’t admit it for fear that the Pharisees would expel them from the synagogue. For they loved human praise more than the praise of God”. Two of these leaders, however, in the end, came through for the Lord, and stood up to be counted as *unpopular*, for the Bible indicates that neither Nicodemus nor Joseph of Arimathea voted to convict

Lord Jesus of blasphemy during the kangaroo trial held to pronounce Him guilty of sedition, so He could be executed by the Romans, and the Jewish leaders thereby rid themselves of this troublemaker Who had been leading the people away from them, the “rightful” leaders! For after the crucifixion, Joseph gave his own tomb to be the burial place for Lord Jesus’ body, and Nicodemus also brought spices helping Joseph anoint the Lord Jesus’ body. They stuck their necks out at that point, publicly identifying themselves with the condemned criminal, no longer seeking the praise of men, but rather preferring the praise of God.

Our Lord Jesus Himself, did not seek the spotlight, fame, or fortune. For, as King of the Universe, He already had far and greater things than mere worldly riches and adoration. For the praise of men is as fickle as it is momentarily glorious. The people thronged His Palm Sunday “parade” route, festively waving their palm branches and shouting His praises. Until He didn’t live up to their expectations. In less than a week, most of those who had so enthusiastically exalted Him now clamored for His death. Talk about “cancel culture”, He had just been “cancelled”! As hard to take as that may well have been, it was as nothing compared to what He had already sacrificed in His agony in prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane, and even before that when He descended to earth to be wrapped in human flesh in Mary’s womb. Philippians 2:7-8 state in a few phrases what He did, while our minds can scarcely comprehend it: “He gave up His divine privileges; He

took the humble position of a slave and was born as a human being. When He appeared in human form, He humbled Himself in obedience to God and died a criminal's death on a cross". If His incarnation in Mary's womb had not been sacrifice enough, He allowed Himself to be declared an outlaw, and be condemned to die the most gruesome death the world had conceived. From the world's highest praises on Palm Sunday to the world's vilest hate on Good Friday, Lord Jesus' "fifteen minutes of fame" truly were short lived! At least so the Jewish and Roman leadership hoped. He was truly upsetting the apple cart, exposing the depraved corruption of the Jewish "swamp", in bed as it was with the Roman "deep state". He was declared a "domestic terrorist deplorable in need of reprogramming", and had to be stopped, by *all* means!

So what did He do? Well, He did what He had come to do! He had a purpose in this earthly life. Every single one of us do. God has not made any of us by mistake or by accident. Each of us, and most especially Jesus the Son of Man, were created and given physical life here on earth for a unique and never-to-be-repeated purpose. Christ Jesus' purpose was to be Sacrifice, Redeemer and Savior of the World. And so, because the time for this highest ever calling had come, He allowed Himself to be arrested, tried, tortured, and condemned to death by crucifixion. Death row then was "mercifully" short. Just the hour or so it took Him to carry His cross to Golgotha, where He was nailed to the cross. As Messianic Rabbi Jason Sobel discovered, Christ could

only die at this point in history, for the process of crucifixion involved wounding the body specifically by nailing the hands and the feet to a wooden post, cut from the trunk of a tree. For in the Garden of Eden, Eve and Adam sinned by taking with their hands the forbidden fruit of the only forbidden tree, in the very middle of the garden. Thus Lord Jesus' hands were pierced with nails. When they sinned, God prophesied in Genesis 3:14-15: "Then the Lord God said to the serpent, "Because you have done this, you are cursed more than all animals, domestic and wild. You will crawl on your belly, groveling in the dust as long as you live. And I will cause hostility between you and the woman, and between your offspring and her Offspring. He will strike your head, and you will strike His heel". Thus Lord Jesus' feet were pierced to satan's satisfaction, him not realizing that this very prophecy was being fulfilled in that moment. And Lord Jesus' side was pierced with a sword by the centurion, for it was the woman Eve, who had been created from a rib taken from Adam's side that led him to sin, so here in Lord Jesus' side, was He also pierced.

But Christ was also "wearing" a "crown" of thorns. This was no accident either, for it brought, full circle, to completion God's word in Genesis 3:17-18: 'And to the man He said, "Since you listened to your wife ..., the ground is cursed because of you. ... It will grow thorns and thistles for you". So here, in a crown of thorns and thistles, even the earth itself is being redeemed and saved for a future rebirth into a new earth.

Our Lord Jesus never sought the worldly praise of men and women. He was not “collecting followers” a la the ways of social media. But He was very much seeking to “go viral”, in the ways of Heaven, to bring forth unto the Great Godhead, a great multitude that no one could count of every people and tongue and nation, the saved, the redeemed, who would thence and forever praise and serve God, administering His creation, in earth and in Heaven, forever and ever. But how did He go about going “viral”?

On the night in which He was betrayed, just before He and the disciples ate the Passover meal, Lord and Master Jesus washed His disciples’ feet. Then and for years thereafter, the cosmic consequence of this event escaped the Lord’s followers and the other Gospels don’t record it. Its meaning didn’t come into focus until much later, when the Apostle John recorded it in John 13. But in his old age and accumulated wisdom, Holy Spirit revealed to John just how key to everything Lord Jesus’ act of humility was. For even He told Peter, in John 13:7: “‘You don’t understand now what I am doing, but someday you will’.” For as the Lord taught us in Mark 9:35: “Whoever wants to be first must take last place and be the servant of everyone else”. The exact opposite of our world. No wonder the world hates us! Matthew 5:11-12: “Blessed are you when people insult you and persecute you, and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of Me. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward in heaven is great; for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you”.

