

Now may the words of my mouth and the meditation of all our hearts be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, our strength and our redeemer.

In the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

“...he was shocked and went away grieving...”

People who know or have learnt to exist on the edge understand full well what it takes to fit in. To figure out how to assimilate and integrate. To chameleon-like blend in so that your participation in the dominant and often domineering culture does not affect your chances of survival in it.

It's a confusing place to be.

If I just blend in, then who am I? And who will ever meet me as I really am.

If I choose not to blend in but instead to stand out – then will I be accepted?

It is not a question that troubles you if you are used to being in control and the master or mistress of your day-to-day destiny. However, if you have witnessed others like yourself make an attempt at full participation and struggle it causes you, causes me, to pause or to turn away from the gift of opportunities, lest rejection swiftly follows.

The bravest people are those who step forward even when historically, economically and because of lack of safety they have good reasons not to participate, not to lead, not to step forward.

We should be assured that such attempts to 'lean-in' (*or whatever the current phrase is*) always happen with real thought and consideration of the cost it might incur and for the Christian or person of faith in God, with prayer.

It may be cheesy but simply put, 'we win when we bow to Him'. Such an idea may trouble those who believe themselves 'winners' at life without much assistance from the creator of the life and world we are in. The Christian or the person who has met

with and given themselves wholly to God have an alternative life source to trust, just in case culture, society, institutions including the churches and people of all kinds turn us away.

There should be a resonance to the person who knows what it is to have known the presence of God in the lion's den. Those who have built faith in Jesus that has been forged in the fires of trial and tribulation. I have seen in my own parish, the faith of those with less materially grow stronger during the pandemic.

What the marginalised person of faith has to their advantage is the recognition that true power does not reside in personal position or status or money but in confidence that being bent low by life is not the end of life. It is the place from which the suffering servant did all his saving work.

The landowning man had started out in his encounter with the way, the truth and the life on his knees, bowed down before the loving King. He had gone to meet Jesus and found the right physical posture to greet the King of Kings and Lord of Lords.

But perhaps this is all a self-centred plan. Even if that sounds a little harsh. 'Good teacher', he says full of flattery, 'what must I do to inherit eternal life?'

The good and best teacher, looks at him, sees through all this, loves him anyway and says, 'you lack one thing'

This man of status and of power in possessions recognises that Jesus recognises him for who he is, and he can't cope.

"...he is shocked and went away grieving..."

Jesus has looked at him. Jesus sees him and his motives and loved him anyway. For, "All are naked and laid bare to the eyes of the one to whom we must render and account."

The disciples standing around are amazed at this turn of events. If not this keeper of the laws, 'then who can be saved?' The man who had come running and kneeling goes away back turned, angry and grieving.

Jesus does not miss the opportunity to educate his disciples. Listen, he says, "many who are first will be last, and the last will be first."

In recent weeks we have been prompted to recognise another good teacher. A Black Welsh woman. Betty Campbell. She was a Headteacher. The first black woman to become a headteacher in Wales. Betty died in her 80s a few years ago. But the monument to her – the first of its kind of any woman in Wales – erects her to her full stature in the presence of the people, and above those who had stood over her aspirations and told her she could never teach let alone lead.

Betty reminded me of the Guyanese woman, Beryl Gilroy whose overlooked memoir reappeared recently. Even I, a Black man interested in these subjects, had hardly across her or her book before. Well, more fool me. Beryl was one of the first black headteachers in the UK, working in north London in the 1970s, and she has written a memoir of important historical record. "Black people roast people and eat them." her pupils said to her. No doubt copying what adults were saying elsewhere. But Beryl rides upon that racist storm. And takes her pupils from that derogatory place to become bright and engaged under her teaching and leadership.

Jesus offered this man, this would-be learner and possible disciple the loving truth and he couldn't take it. Beryl and Betty show us that such love and power in the face of reality can transform the lives of all in their sphere.

Angela Moore, a Jamaican headteacher in east London, not far from my parish, has inspired hundreds of children in her Roman Catholic primary school in one of the most afflicted parts of the country to transform their lives and that of their families fighting for a living wage and affordable housing and winning some campaigns to keep more of their community together.

Jesus's invitation to his disciples is to participate in the work of the kingdom for the sake of the good news. The good news revealed to us in the words of His Mother,

Mary, “he has cast down the mighty from their thrones and lifted up the humble.” That upside-down nature of God’s kingdom revealed when Jesus gets down in the dirt with the accused woman while those who would seek to literally crush her stand over them.

No wonder these Black women make inspirational leaders – for not many groups have been considered so low by so many, for so long. These are ordinary Black women, Betty, Beryl and Angela and they have done extraordinary things. In the Bible and in the history of the Church, “God raises up leaders from and not just for those who are oppressed. From Moses and Miriam to Rosa Parks and Desmond Tutu, God chooses the people who experience injustice to bring it to an end. It is only the beginning when we have churches with a “heart for the poor”. The journey takes us, according to the New Testament, so that the poor are the heart of the Church.” (‘People of Power’, Centre for Theology & Community, 2019)

Of course, there is a possibility for all of us to put our work and resources toward Gospel work. Jesus offers the way, the truth and the life to everyone, including this wealthy landowner but he has no way of knowing an invitation is there. He does not recognise the category of gift Jesus is presenting.

It is only stupefied foolishness that sees such a knee bent disposition as a vulnerability and weakness. From such people the kingdom of God has been relentlessly perpetuated for they have met him in the actual streets of injustice and in the mental deserts of marginalisation.

What the landowner in today’s Gospel has not realised is that the true place of power *is* bowed down before the Lord. However, down there bowed low he loses his bearings. He may look like he is submitting to the Lord but at least for now he cannot do it.

There Jesus is with the truth and a searing love and from there the lowly are lifted up to His way. This is the miracle of our weakness made strong. For God all things are possible, and we win when we bow to Him.

To meet with Jesus, we must understand how to approach. Hebrews guides us to indeed approach, for his arms are open wide. We may come to Him boldly, with our feet planted firmly on the ground and not on pedestals. We must recognise the place of Jesus Christ as on the throne of grace where justice, mercy and grace can be found.

This is not a plan unfolding at our behest. This is not a negotiation. It is a recognition that whatever power I have – whether mighty on earth or not – I must choose His power to save me.

Amen.