

Your King comes to you, Lowly and Humble

Sermon by Marcel Rebiai

The fact that Jesus came into this world "lowly and humble" turns our value system upside-down.

Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion! Shout, daughter of Jerusalem! See, your king comes to you, righteous and having salvation, lowly and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey. I will take away the chariots from Ephraim and the warhorses from Jerusalem, and the battle bow will be broken. He will proclaim peace to the nations. His rule will extend from sea to sea and from the River to the ends of the earth. Zechariah 9:9-10

The mystery of Christmas, the birth of Jesus, is that God himself enters his own creation. We hear that, nod, and take it for granted because we have already heard it so often. If we are honest, it doesn't change us much because we don't really understand what it means. In addition, the way the story is related and the way we experience God's kingdom make it difficult for us to comprehend the incarnation. It was difficult for the Jewish people both then and now, as well as for all the other races, even though the prophet calls to Jerusalem, Zion, and the Jewish people, "Rejoice greatly!" Why? "Your king is coming to you, righteous and victorious!" This is something which we can all grasp; we think, "Yes, that's it!" We can relate to this for in some way we are all searching for help; we all need support. Therefore if we are seeking a king, we seek one who is victorious, and a helper. If this were the end of our text, we would all say "amen" and be happy about the help we received through it.

But then we read, "He is humble (= a possible translation of the Hebrew) and lowly." It is difficult for us to think of these traits in a victorious king from whom we expect help. For we know that this world is ruled by the principle, "The world belongs to the strong and the victorious, to those who can get their own way, the achievers, the self-assured, those who know who they are and what they can do, who are aware of their rights and can insist on them." Therefore Jesus makes the strange comment when speaking about John the Baptist, "The kingdom of heaven suffers violence and violent men take it by force" (Matt. 11:12).

The reality in this world is that by means of force and violence, by means of human abilities, people can manipulate and suppress others - whether physically, emotionally, or intellectually. They compel others to submit to their will. This is force. Force reduces people to subservience. The violent seize life by coercion and attempt to grab the kingdom of God by force. No one in this world wants to be on the losing side; with the stutterers, the stammerers and the insecure. Everyone wants to be on the side of those who express themselves effectively and who are secure with who they are, what they have to offer and what they are worth. So we have endless therapy and self-expression groups where the goal is to find ourselves and our way.

The world is screaming. If people search for a helper or a king, then they want one who surpasses them in everything, one who says, "I'm totally successful, I can give you ultimate success. I'm stronger." The world we live in is extremely hard. Only those who fend for themselves survive. Therefore people will fight with any means available. From an early age we learn how to get ahead.

Success and poverty

And now a "humble and lowly" king enters a world which seeks success. But who wants to be subject to a lowly king? Such a king cannot buy anything or accumulate possessions in this world. A humble person is simply lost here, for he will surely not elbow his way through. He will not manipulate or misuse others for his own aims, nor will he insist

on making others compliant because that would be incompatible with humility. Only self-confident people who focus solely on themselves and their goals use such methods.

It is not by coincidence that Jesus is compared to a lamb. Can you picture a defenceless lamb being put into a pack of wolves? We may ask ourselves over and over again why God chose to reveal himself in this way. He who could have done anything chose such a path, a lamb in the midst of wolves. He sends someone humble, someone lowly to a place where he is fully aware that the Jewish people and the nations are waiting for an entirely different character.

This helper-king doesn't only come absolutely without resources, poor, and powerless. He even comes to absolutely unspectacular, ordinary, simple people. These are not prominent people in any way and have simply been overlooked by the world. I can imagine that Joseph and Mary were just such inconspicuous people who gave way to others. The only thing written of Mary is that she pondered everything she had heard in her heart. Apart from this we know nothing about her. It is not written that her neighbours gave her or Joseph special honour in their village.

To whom does God entrust his son?

God entrusts his son to insignificant people. We would understand better if God's son, this central figure in human history, had come into the world via an aristocratic family or people of influence. God is an incomprehensible strategist in our eyes. He let his son come into this world in a remote stable, instead of through Jerusalem's high priestly family - or at least among people who could have immediately made his incarnation public news. The only people who noticed him there were a few shepherds. This is not human nature's strategic way of thinking.

What qualified Joseph and Mary?

I asked myself what qualified Joseph and Mary in order for God to entrust himself to them. Then I realized that there is a great difference between God giving people his gifts and God entrusting himself to them. These are two different things. Many people have gifts from God. For example, we know that the high priest Caiaphas had the gift of prophecy. It is written that Caiaphas prophesied because he was high priest at that time. He prophesied that one had to suffer for all. God bestows gifts even on people he doesn't entrust himself to.

Thus I am always touched by John 2:24, "But Jesus would not entrust himself to them, for he knew all men." Joseph and Mary were obviously people to whom God entrusted himself. They were open for something which God deemed essential. They were people we would now call simple; people with no hidden agenda. We see this in Mary. After the angel had spoken to her she did not open a discussion with him. Even though she asked, "How shall this be?" she was satisfied with the angel's reply, "God will do it". She didn't say, "Do you know what this will mean for me? I have to think it over carefully. I can't just say yes because others might label me a prostitute. I agree on the condition that you explain it to the others so they won't have the wrong impression of me. I will agree if you see to it that I don't lose face."

These days when God asks something of us, whether directly or through another person, we say, "I have to pray about it" or, "I have to think it over." This is how seriously we take ourselves - our decisions, our possibilities, what we can or cannot cope with. We walk around with our hand on our pulse and when challenged we ask, "Can I manage? Is it good for me? Where will it lead? What will it bring me? What damage could it cause me?" Mary exhibits none of these concerns. She even says, "I am the Lord's servant. Be it unto me according to your word." This is simplicity. Mary understood that "God is God and what God

plans, he will also do. If he says this, then I don't have to worry about how he will do it, even if I myself don't understand and cannot even count to three."

Mary must have been a woman with an unpretentious disposition, a woman who in the truest sense was single-minded before God. She did not consider her honour or her own goals important. She took the risk that Joseph, to whom she was betrothed - the essence of her future and her dreams - would misunderstand and abandon her. Mary took God more seriously than everything else, including her own hopes and goals.

God seeks out such people to entrust himself to - not to entrust his gifts to, but himself. God gives his gifts to many differing people. But even when he does so and these people lead others to faith through their gifts, or do great things, this still says nothing about God's intimate relationship to them. In Is. 57:15 we read, "This is what the high and lofty One says - he who lives forever, whose name is holy: 'I live in a high and holy place, but also with him who is broken and lowly in spirit.'" A broken spirit is a spirit which absolutely no longer counts on itself. A broken spirit has profoundly understood that God alone is important, not one's own potential goals and dreams. To these people, says God, I will entrust myself personally.

The source of pride

Why did the Messiah really come? Why did God send his son? Why did he himself come to this world in his son? We quickly answer, "In order to save us and take us out of darkness." Then what HAS destroyed our lives? What HAS driven us into death and brought our death sentence upon the rest of creation? Is it not pride? The devil rose up against God, expressing with his whole being, "I'm someone also and I want to become at least as important as God!" This is the source of pride. Pride is sin. Pride is the death of man and of creation. And ever since, pride has been the ground under everyone's feet. Everything which takes root in it is poisoned. That includes our definition of power, glory, and the fulfilment of everything we associate with life.

Jesus came as the antithesis of our ideas and our pride. He had to tear down everything man had built up since the fall. Jesus can begin with a person only from the very bottom. Whoever is unwilling to start out again from nothing has no chance of entering the kingdom of God.

Humility is God's remedy

Humility is God's remedy. This characteristic, this heavenly elixir, roots out and destroys pride. Jesus' being is absolutely foreign to this world. We often have the feeling that humility is something lovely, a good Christian virtue. Of course we know that humility is not simply a matter of lowering our eyes when someone looks at us, or shyly retreating to the back row. Nor does it mean portraying ourselves as less than we are, playing down our gifts and emphasizing our weak points a bit more. Humility is the attitude of Jesus which expresses the sole importance of God, who alone is life, whose word is absolutely trustworthy. Humility is the remedy for man, the protective covering for our heart in this world. There is only one thing the devil cannot bear: the fragrance of genuine humility.

Without God, man is nothing, says the Bible - really nothing; not simply "not so good", but mere clay, earth. Humility had to be visible from the outset, from Jesus' birth. Jesus could come into the world only in a place men avoid - in a stable, in poverty and cold, on the fringe of society. But do you realize why this is so liberating, so redeeming? This very stable is accessible to everybody. Not everyone is admitted to a palace, but a shepherd as well as a king can enter the stable.

It's great news when God says, "It is really possible for everybody to come to me. And every one who comes must know that in the stable all are equal."

Do you realize where God likes to be? Right in the place we try to avoid at all cost! Who wants to be unimportant? Who wants to live in the most lowly place, where no one notices him - without modern communication, without Internet? "But that's exactly where I am," says God.

What good news this is! "Who am I, anyway?" we often think, and then exaggerate a bit. "I'm useless to God because I'm so weak and untalented, because I was so emotionally wounded during my childhood, because of my up-bringing, and so on. All this makes me unfit for God." But if I am really convinced that I am unimportant and have nothing to bring, isn't it just another way to get attention by claiming, "Look how poor I am! Did you all hear it?" (so that even if I am poor, at least everyone will look at me!) Then the good news of the Incarnation is for me. For Jesus dwells in just such a place. He delights in people who say with their whole hearts, "Lord, I am your servant. Come to me. Anything you wish can happen in my life." And then he may indeed take us down a very unspectacular route.

I always wonder what Mary was thinking during those thirty years before Jesus' public ministry. She knew that he was the Messiah. She saw him washing up, sweeping wood chips, fetching water, and kept thinking: "He's already 20, already 25, and still nothing is happening. Nothing is changing in the world. And yet he is the one who is to save the whole world! "Can you imagine what was going on in her heart?"

God lets fruit ripen in our hearts until it is really mature. We would prefer to see the tree full of fruit the next day, in order to prove that God has really come to us. Or at least that there could be some special aura around us so that people could notice that we're very special. This does not express the attitude, "Lord, I am your servant. Your will be done in me", but rather, "I would like something in advance." This hurts God because we are really saying, "You alone aren't enough for me. I would like to profit outwardly as well. I want others to take note of the fact that I am taking a spiritual path and that my life is fruitful."

Can you picture how long people waited for Mary? "If the rumour was actually true that an angel came to her and her son is the Messiah, then we should see some evidence!" For thirty years nothing happened. God asks this of us. But this period is not simply barren; he is working in our hearts and wants to become very familiar to us. God knows that the more familiar he is to us, the less vulnerable we are when we take the message of his kingdom out into the world.

If we are convinced that we have nothing to give and are really poor, weak, and insignificant, that we are like a stable:- musty smell, straw, stubborn as a mule, hard-necked as an ox. Then we can know that this is exactly where God likes to materialise and begin building his kingdom.

We hinder God with our pride and our selfishness; we hinder him when we are overly concerned about our weaknesses, our wounds and our past. But when we say, "God, I really am one of the poor in this world, those without resources, those who are set out among the wolves," then God replies, "Good, I have been looking for just such a one."

It is up to us whether God can entrust himself to us. It is up to us whether we only want his gifts in order to build something in his name..... which also bears our own name. God gives that. He needs many workers. He needs many people who build things in his name and with his gifts. But that doesn't automatically mean that these people are also his confidantes. Let's not forget this.

Now we can understand the words, "Be watchful. The first - who build many things with many gifts - could find themselves among the last. And the insignificant of this world, who don't show so much outwardly, could turn out to be the first." Why? Because God entrusted himself to these insignificant people and they lived in intimate fellowship with him,

even though - like Mary - this was not outwardly visible. If this isn't good news, that God comes down to such places and loves to entrust himself to such people, then I don't know what else can help us!

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