Malcolm Clemens Young Job 38:1-7, 34-41

Grace Cathedral, San Francisco, CA 2B31 Psalm 104:1-9, 25, 35c

21 Pentecost (Proper 24B) 8:30 a.m. and 11:00 a.m. Eucharist Hebrews 5:1-10

Sunday 17 October 2021 Mark 10:35-45

**San Francisco’s Beautiful Ugly Truth**

“[W]however wishes to be great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all” (Mk. 10).

How do you know if Christianity is true? Proving that there is a personal God or heaven, the trinity or the divinity of Christ might be difficult. Arguing that our religion is the best religion seems silly. I’d much rather hear about what I can learn from other religions than debate their relative deficiencies.

Instead I want to ask about perhaps the central teaching in the Gospel of Mark. Jesus is talking about status and its meaning in our life. Quite simply is it better for us as individuals and a society when people use power to dominate others, or should they act in Jesus’ words like “servants.” This question concerns every aspect of our social life. You can see it built into our material world.

1. I want to begin with two things I love about San Francisco and what they say about our history. The first is Victorian houses. Between 1850 and 1900 about 40,000 of them were built in San Francisco.[[1]](#endnote-1) The writer Thomas Aidala writes that the, “city was put together out of buildings that roar with fun, that never… take themselves so seriously that they forget to smile.”[[2]](#endnote-2) Victorian houses were built using the latest technology.[[3]](#endnote-3) They were thoroughly modern and made to look old. They were mostly sold to working and middle class people. Despite all the changes in real estate markets they still feel like eccentric mansions for ordinary people.

Another thing I love about San Francisco are the Sutro Baths out at Lands End.[[4]](#endnote-4) Adolf Sutro loved watching the waves at Fisherman’s Cove and in 1884 he built a living 100 foot by 100 foot aquarium. By 1887 it could be emptied of 250,000 gallons of water in five minutes. In 1888 Sutro started running a steam train (that started from the corner of Presidio and California). It cost a nickel (compared to the 20 cent Southern Pacific line).[[5]](#endnote-5)

The Sutro Baths opened for bathing in 1896. At 500 feet long and 354 feet wide with six saltwater tanks, it was the largest indoor swimming complex in the world. Sutro had a passion for, “making amenities affordable for the common” person.[[6]](#endnote-6) But initially they excluded black people. After John Harris won a law suit in 1897 everyone was welcome.[[7]](#endnote-7) There could be as many as 8,000 visitors on a weekend day. The whole thing burned down in June 1966, but even the ruins are beautiful and available to everyone.

My point is that an idea is built into this place. Even in the past we had more millionaires here than other cities, but back then people understood that radical differences in wealth destabilized community and made it harder for the ones who served others to be respected. They wanted to make the really good things in life available to everyone.

I understand that our experience of inequality in this particular place is affected by markets, property arrangements and tax codes beyond our control. But something is missing at the heart of our experience of San Francisco today.

2. The force of our gospel gets obscured because we do not know the full context of the story (which begins with Mk. 10:32). Jesus is walking along ahead of everyone. Mark explains that they are amazed and also afraid. Jesus takes his twelve closest friends aside and tells them exactly what is going to happen to him, that he will be condemned and then tortured to death.

Then in the next sentence James and John, the two brothers who with Peter constitute Jesus’ inmost circle, ask to be seated next to Jesus in his “glory.” We the hearers know the irony of this request because Jesus will be crucified. Despite being plainly told they still do not understand. This scene in which Jesus 1. tells the disciples what will happen to him, 2. they misunderstand and 3. Jesus tries to teach them, is repeated three times. To further emphasize the disciple’s refusal to see, these three scenes take place sequentially between two stories about Jesus healing blind people.[[8]](#endnote-8)

The cross, a suffering messiah who dies for the people, a new way to be human in which we no longer try to dominate others but serve them instead – this is hard for them and for us. On Saturday night we saw the musical *Jesus Christ Superstar*. In the Garden of Gethsemane when Jesus longs for his friends to be with him they wear headphones and sleep through his moment of need. This seems like the nearly universal response to him.

Jesus gives his life as a ransom for many, so that we can be free. Jesus tries to show us how to be free from the constant preoccupation with status that destroys our life. And the cross, that cynical instrument of torture and death, cannot obscure this truth. The nations have rulers who lord it over them. Their great ones are tyrants. “But it is not so among you; but whoever wishes to be great among you must be your servant” (Mk. 10).

3. Humans are not the only ones consumed by questions about status. Stanford professor Robert Sapolsky studies how various other primates (but particularly baboons) “lord it over” each other.[[9]](#endnote-9) Through MRI studies he concludes, that primates are, “fantastically attuned to status differences.” We perceive these differences subconsciously, in less time than it takes to blink our eye.[[10]](#endnote-10)

High levels of inequality make us less likely to believe that other people can be trusted, less inclined to join groups. Inequality erodes social capital which is the trust, reciprocity and cooperation that we need to live together in peace. High inequality makes us treat each other more poorly.[[11]](#endnote-11) Those people who scientists of have studied and who especially value prestige and power seem less able to care about those who are less fortunate.[[12]](#endnote-12)

Furthermore lower socioeconomic status has an immensely detrimental effect on our health. It’s not just that the poor have bad health and everyone else is doing equally well. Every step down the ladder means worse health. This is not just because poor people have less access to healthcare. This phenomenon can be observed even in countries with socialized medicine. He concludes that the problem is that “the psychological stress” of having a low socioeconomic status is what decreases health.[[13]](#endnote-13)

Sapolsky concludes writing, “When humans invented material inequality, they came up with a way of subjugating the low ranking like nothing ever before seen in the primate world.”[[14]](#endnote-14)

I began by asking how we know if Christianity is true. A central part of the Gospel of Mark has to do with the role that status plays in our life. We are like the headphone wearing disciples. We cannot hear because we cannot imagine what it would be like to really be free of our attachment to status and power. But Jesus persists in calling us back home to God. He warns us that our preoccupation with status damages us as a society and as individuals.

Learning to put others first is how we realize this promise of freedom. This is not at all easy. We are entangled in so many contradictions. But church can help us to live in this new reality. We offer each other the chance to really act as if every single person has infinite value as a child of God, as if Jesus gave his life even for that person who irritates us most.

On 1 April 1989 there was a funeral in St. Stephen’s Cathedral, Vienna, of the Empress Zita of Austria/Hungary, the widow of the last Emperor Charles 1 who died 70 years before. She was 96. It was a two hour service with 6000 people. They sang Mozart’s Requiem. Then they went to the church of the Capuchins – the burial place of the Hapsburgs. When the procession arrived, the doors were closed. The chamberlain knocked three times and one of the friars inside called out: “Who requests entry?”

The reply was formidable and spoke of a vanished Europe. “Her Majesty Zita, Empress of Austria, crowned Queen of Hungary, Queen of Bohemia, Dalmatia, Croatia, Slavonia, Galizia, Illyria, Queen of Jerusalem, Archduchess of Austria, Grand Duchess of Tuscany and Cracow, Duchess of Lorraine, Salzburg – the list went with over twenty more titles. There then followed her orders which were not modest.

After all this the friar replied, “We do not know her. Who requires entry?” “Her Majesty Zita, Empress of Austria, Queen of Hungary.” Again the reply came, “We do not know her. Who requires entry?” This time the chamberlain replied: “Our sister Zita, a poor mortal sinner.” And the gates were thrown open.[[15]](#endnote-15)

There is a desire in our hearts to live in equality which I see built into the landscape of this city. But still we lose ourselves in our own ego. We hunger for recognition in a way that set us at odds with others. And yet the gates of this Cathedral are thrown open for us.

I have always loved the “Brotherhood Window” in the South Transept. James and John, the brothers who were so blind to Jesus’ teachings and infuriated their fellow disciples are actually honored in the window at Jesus’ right and left hand. What they wanted was misguided and showed their ignorance and yet somehow their dream was realized two thousand years later in this Cathedral in a faraway land that they had never heard of. May the impossible contradictions of our life find resolution in God’s holiness.

Let us Pray: Dear God, give us peace in the restless slumber of our egotism. When the thought of you wakes in our hearts, let it not awaken like a frightened bird that flies away in dismay but like a child waking from its sleep with a heavenly smile. Amen.

Photographs:

1. Sutro Baths

2. Victorian houses in San Francisco

3. Robert Sapolsky

4. Baboon Hierarchy

5. South Transept Stained Glass window – image of James and John next to Jesus

1. <https://www.innsf.com/blog/famous-victorian-houses-of-san-francisco> [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Thomas Aidala in *The Great Houses of San Francisco*. Cited in Gary Kamiya and Paul Madonna, *Spirits of San Francisco: Voyages Through the Unknown City* (NY: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2020) 145. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. These buildings were revolutionary in financing as well as in construction methods. Gary Kamiya and Paul Madonna, *Spirits of San Francisco: Voyages Through the Unknown City* (NY: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2020) 143-5. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. <https://www.sfchronicle.com/projects/2021/visuals/sutro-baths-archive-photos/> [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Gary Kamiya and Paul Madonna, *Spirits of San Francisco: Voyages Through the Unknown City* (NY: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2020) 126-132. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Ibid. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. In 1897 John Harris sued Adolf Sutro after he was excluded from using the baths because of his race. He won his lawsuit and the baths were required to be open for everyone. <https://www.sfgate.com/opinion/article/Sutro-Baths-was-test-case-for-blacks-civil-rights-3588731.php> [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Mk. 8:22 and Mk. 10:46. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. kai« proskalesa¿menoß aujtou\ß oJ ∆Ihsouvß le÷gei aujtoi√ß: oi¶date o¢ti oi˚ dokouvnteß a‡rcein tw◊n e˙qnw◊n katakurieu/ousin aujtw◊n kai« oi˚ mega¿loi aujtw◊n katexousia¿zousin aujtw◊n. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. Robert Sapolsky, *Behave: The Biology of Humans at Our Best and Worst* (NY: Penguin Books, 2017) 442. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. Ibid., 292. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. Social Dominance Orientation (SDO). Ibid., 440. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. Ibid., 441. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. Ibid., 442. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. Alan Jones brought this to me. I love that it takes place on April Fool’s Day. Michael Mayne, *Learning to Dance* (London: DLT, 2001) 165. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)