Sparrows

June 21st, 2020

Throughout my life, I have received many gifts, more gifts than I can count. Some of them, I still possess; others, I have shared; still others were sadly wasted or lost. Of material gifts, I was most thankful for books, naturally, and roads. Books were magical and allowed your mind to travel. Roads could let you travel physically to wonderful physical places—to beautiful forests, quiet lakes, smouldering volcanoes, or the great ocean. When I was older, I came to realize that being thankful for books and roads meant being thankful for many other things—printing presses, machine oil, paper mills, delivery trucks, bookstores, and countless staff. Roads require civil engineers, surveyors, provincial and city planners, cement trucks, gravel pits, gasoline, oil rigs, electricians, road workers, and others—which comes to well over a quarter of a million people in Canada at a very modest estimate. And, of course, all of those workers have to eat, which means being thankful for farmers, butchers, grocers, truck drivers, restaurants, food inspectors, health officers, refrigerator and other appliance companies, et cetera. Starting from one thing you are grateful for, you can begin to map all the industries, trade routes and human beings involved in bringing you something useful or meaningful. One gift is intertwined with thousands, millions of other gifts in life, as history repeatedly shows. And this is only to speak of physical gifts.

One of the greatest gifts you can receive in life is a meaningful event. One day, when I was about thirteen, a young woman fell ill on the roadside near Lake Toya. I had no idea what to do, but I ran down the road to a kiosk or vending machine and bought her a can of oolong tea. Oolong tea obviously cures everything. Although she could barely speak, she was very thankful for my medically useless gift. And I am very thankful for this memory for several reasons. I am thankful that God allowed me a moment of spontaneous, quixotic giving. The only thing I regret is that this has not been my consistent reaction to events throughout life. Instead of giving or running to look for a gift to give, I have complained, made demands, waited in vain for miracles, prayed without conviction, and have treated others poorly. Gifts help us step outside of ourselves; they are the path to freedom. Gifts transform the giver, the one who receives the gift, and even the gift itself sometimes. Some gifts can transform an entire historical landscape. The historian Fernand Braudel wrote about such gifts—things like maize or potatoes that left indelible changes on Europe (*Capitalism and Material Life 1400-1800*). The codex, the book format we take for granted, was a gift of the early Christians, who though they did not invent it, made it popular and practical for everyday life (R.A. Markus, *Christianity in the Roman World.*)

In what is one of his most challenging discourses on discipleship, the Lord Jesus speaks of avoiding fear and of being ready to give. He says: “‘Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground unperceived by your Father” (Matthew 10:29). Sparrows were cheap. Jesus often uses the cheapest, smallest, least considered things to show us heavenly realities. This is something we still have not grasped as modern Christians. There is something in us that balks at embracing what looks useless, imperfect, rustic or poor. Jesus is not speaking scientifically, either. This is not about the value of sparrows in their habitat or what they accomplish for the well-being of the earth. Jesus emphasizes the cheapness of the sparrows and says: “Yet not one of them will fall to the ground unperceived by your Father.” It reminds us of an earlier discourse, when he said: “Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they?” (Matthew 6:26). Besides acknowledging that our values are quite different from what God values, Jesus admonishes us to make room in our hearts by banishing fear. One reason we fear is we are acquisitive, and this state of being makes us hostile, as James says (James 4:1-6). When our value is placed in what we acquire or think others should acquire, we have stripped ourselves of our dignity and what it means to be really human. Jesus asks: *Are you not of more value than the sparrows?* The sparrows that we disregard—the sparrows that are precious to God. To be a real disciple means understanding that our values and their accompanying fears are misplaced. Our lives are filled with the world, but they need to be filled with God.

God wants to give everything, but we cannot receive everything unless we learn to yield. The more the world has a hold on you, the more you are filled with the world, the less room you are going to have for God—his gifts, his wisdom, his grace at work in your life. And even the gifts He has already given will be invisible or hateful to you because your heart will be disordered. And if there is no room for God in your heart, you are not going to love people. As Jesus says further on in this discourse: “And whoever does not take up the cross and follow me is not worthy of me. Those who find their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it” (Matthew 10:38-39). The cross is the ultimate symbol of self-denial and self-giving. It is through the cross that followers of Christ receive everything. You cannot love the world and really love people. When we take up our crosses and let go of the world, we become ready to love, and thus to give. Jesus promises this as well: “And everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or fields, for my name’s sake, will receive a hundredfold, and will inherit eternal life. But many who are first will be last, and the last will be first” (Matthew 19:29-30). Thus, Jesus ends his discourse saying: “‘Whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me. Whoever welcomes a prophet in the name of a prophet will receive a prophet’s reward; and whoever welcomes a righteous person in the name of a righteous person will receive the reward of the righteous; and whoever gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones in the name of a disciple—truly I tell you, none of these will lose their reward.’” (Matthew 10:40-42). Jesus speaks of welcoming the apostles, prophets, righteous people, and children. This contrasts considerably with our usual picture of Jesus welcoming the outcasts, the profligates, the traitors. I believe this is meant to show the pre-eminence of the kingdom of heaven. All giving is blessed, but giving for the sake of the kingdom of heaven truly lifts our lives and the lives of others up to God.

A cup of cold water is beautiful, simple and true. It is on the level of sparrows again. Our gifts, our motives and our relationships to giving should be as clear and pure as the water and as innocent as the sparrows. And this involves the giving of our time and skills as well—not just our money. The apostles had very little money, but they were sent out to give. The first healing miracle recorded in the Acts of the Apostles occurs because Peter and John have no alms to give, so they heal a man instead, saying: “‘I have no silver or gold, but what I have I give you; in the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, stand up and walk.’” (Acts 3:6). The best gift we can give someone is not our money, time or efforts, but a gift that enables people to stand up, walk and follow Jesus. Whatever we give, the gift within the gift should be Christ Himself and the grace He would give to all. Imagine a world gifted with real virtues. The gift of pure eyes, the gift of open hearts, the gift of sincere words, the gift of yielding hands, the gift of kind thoughts, the gift of patient silence, the gift of souls abandoned to divine grace. These gifts enable us to really give. Jesus shepherds us away from a false charity and into real charity. The Acts of the Apostles teaches us that Ananias and Sapphira wanted to gain reputation and position in the church through pretending to give all the proceeds from a sale of their property (Acts 5:1-11); Simon the Magician wanted to buy the Holy Spirit (Acts 8:9-24). Those are instances of self-worship. Real giving comes at a cost to ourselves. Not just our money, time or effort, but perhaps also in our assessment of ourselves. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus said: “‘Beware of practising your piety before others in order to be seen by them; for then you have no reward from your Father in heaven. ‘So whenever you give alms, do not sound a trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, so that they may be praised by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. But when you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your alms may be done in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you” (Matthew 6:1-4). When you gift a gift in Japan, it is customary to apologize for what you are giving and say: “Please accept this boring gift”. It removes all power and expectation of reward from the giver; it removes any traditional weighing of values regarding the gift; it shifts the emphasis to the moment of giving and receiving itself. Theoretically, it makes the gift a true gift. In the old Kurosawa film, *The Seven Samurai* (1954), the warrior Kanbei Shimada (played by Takashi Shimura) shaves his head in order to rescue a hostage from a kidnapper. It was disgraceful for the samurai to cut their queues or shave their heads, but in order to deliver some rice balls to the belligerent hostage-taker, Kanbei has to gain the criminal’s trust. Shaved like a monk, in a state of disgrace or humility, he is no longer a threat because he is no longer important. Now that he is insignificant, he can earn the trust of the criminal, and thus give the food and release the hostage. Maybe we need to shave our heads and become insignificant before we give. Maybe we need to be less attached to our roles, our titles, our expertise, our worldly knowledge, our personal histories—anything that would draw attention to ourselves or our station, especially in the church—before we can really understand what giving means, and then begin to freely give and serve. Instead of always trying to know and control, perhaps we need to just step into the unknown and give unknowingly in a world handed over in faith and trust to the God who watches and preserves every sparrow. May we be like the sparrows.