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HISTORICAL SERIES, 2

High Office Requires High Standards

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Introduction

I remember a public school teacher who told us that we would not graduate from grade eight until we had read *Alice in Wonderland*. As the years go by her unusual requirement seems ever more wise. I also remember a theological professor who had a similar request. The book he considered a must for all of us to read was Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment*. Here, too, I find the years have only enhanced his wisdom.

I share these personal experiences because they lead me to ask you today, what book would you make required reading for the new lawyer or judge? The Bible, or your faith community's most holy writing, would be excellent, of course, but we assume you've read it. A legal text like *Black's Law Dictionary* doesn't qualify. We assume you've read that, too! It would have to be a work of fiction that would somehow seduce the reader into discovering her or his humanity in spite of the burden born by academic and professional achievement.

I would hope that such a book would catch the spirit of what we are about in this service. In so doing, it would both acknowledge that transcendent power to whom we are all accountable and, at the same time, expose our finite humanity.

These two truths constitute our focus for this day. Perhaps they are two sides of the same coin.

The Transcendent

Both passages of scripture read this morning affirm the transcendent before which we all stand in awe and reverence.

In Leviticus we read: “You shall not render an unjust judgement, you shall not be partial to the poor or defer to the great; with justice you shall judge your neighbour ... I am the Lord.” Here there is a clear acknowledgement of the transcendent which judges even judges. The word is true for all, but particularly for those whose life is lived close to those things which bring justice and law among us.

St. James says it too: “Be not deceived, every perfect gift is from above.”

Both readings draw us out of our insular world and into the context of the Creator of all.

Such an affirmation is needed by all and even sought by many. It is a word, however, that is often eclipsed by religious parochialism and competition. Indeed, what is perceived as religious rivalry and narcissism has permitted many in our society to lose all sense of religion.

Edward Gibbon, in his *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, seems almost to describe the religious landscape of our society when he says that: “the various modes of worship which prevailed in the Roman world were all considered: by the people as equally true; by the philosopher as equally false; and by the magistrate as equally useful.”

One of the challenges before society today is that of recognizing the multiplicity of religious expression among us while, at the same time, retaining that reverence which healthy religion affirms. But who has the audacity to define healthy religion? No doubt each would confess her own, or his own, tradition to be healthy. Surely, though, one definition has to be that sense of the transcendent which confesses the sanctity of human life. It is here that Raskolnikov fell short. Dostoevsky’s hero or anti-hero saw no value in the life of an

elderly and lonely person; his needs prevailed over those of that unimportant recluse. In selfishly taking another life he lost meaning for his own life.

No matter how our individual religious convictions may differ, I believe they must acknowledge that transcendence which affirms the dignity and the worth of each member of the human family. For me, that surely is the *sine qua non* of religious health.

The Human Dilemma

Regrettably, however, we know that it is impossible to speak of a higher power and of justice while still walking in ways that deny both. Our generation knows all too well that neither the cassock of the priest nor the robe of the magistrate can guarantee character and integrity.

Long before Sigmund Freud, St. James alluded to our ability to talk the language of faith while we fail to live a life of faith when he said: “But be doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves. For if any are the hearers of the word and not doers, they are like those who look at themselves in a mirror; for they look at themselves and, on going away, immediately forget what they were like.”

When we look at ourselves we see what we want to see. The credentials may be there: the ability to articulate well may be there; the zeal of religious conviction may be there ... but, of themselves, these do not guarantee noble character nor integrity. How is something like noble character realized? How is it nurtured? How can you teach integrity?

It is not unusual for preachers, when they gather by themselves, to ask if sermons change anything. It is true that Emerson identified the sermon as the greatest benefit of the Judaic-Christian tradition. Nevertheless, most preachers, at least those who have been preaching a while, would admit that sermons seldom change character. Sermons are known to be able to affirm convictions already held, but they seldom change these convictions.

An article in *The Globe and Mail* of two years ago brought the issue of integrity and character into rather clear focus. Rabbi Gunter Plaut wrote about a meeting held in a suburb of Berlin 50 years ago. The year was 1942. The Second World War was in its early stages. Pearl harbour was less than two months past. Hitler’s armies had

made significant advances into Russia. The outlook for the Axis Powers was rather favourable. Reinhard Heydrich called the meeting. Adolf Eichmann served as recorder. To be sure, the names conjure up images of criminals and demonic personalities, but the meeting was attended by about a dozen or so people, half of whom had Ph.D.'s. Some of them could probably quote Virgil and Homer in their original Latin and Greek. Some could probably even quote the scriptures we read this morning. Some were trained in law and jurisprudence.

They would be seen as respectable citizens in society. They were the kind you'd like your daughter to marry ... or your son to be. One would certainly expect to find strength of character and integrity among such persons. The luncheon was brief. The task identified and addressed. It took only a few hours for this group to decide the fate of the Jews in the conquered territories of Eastern Europe.

We ask: How could these educated leaders do this? The very question betrays our bias that somehow education changes our character and of itself gives us integrity.

We ask: Did they see themselves as devils perpetrating ultimate evil? Probably not! Did they then see themselves as devout citizens doing what was right? How could they?

We can only conclude that they did not allow the truth to penetrate their inner minds and hearts. This then brings us to a further conclusion: Humanity has an unlimited capacity for evil and self-deception. It is naive to assume we outgrow it or that education can wipe it away. I believe that this insight into the human dilemma is also a *sine qua non* of religious health.

Conclusion

Our service today is a prayer that we might receive the gifts of character and integrity.

High office requires high standards. High standards require more than text books and codes of conduct. Training, position, degrees, civil respectability and, yes, sermons, do not automatically make us healthy instruments of justice. In making our prayer for these gifts, we confess our human condition and look to the Transcendent to grant us such favour. Our current insight into our own darker side may make that prayer sound cynical, but I pray not! Our prayer is both our confession and our hope.

Lewis Carroll brings us back to this truth in a charming way. *In Alice through the Looking Glass*, Alice says, “We can’t believe impossible things,” to which the Queen replied, “I daresay you haven’t had much practice. When I was your age, I always did it for half an hour a day. Why, sometimes, I’ve believed as many as six impossible things before breakfast.”

To believe in character and integrity might be difficult. Not to believe, however, is to discard them altogether.

Today we pray for these gifts. May the Lord give us the strength to do our duty, and the love to do it well, so that we, you and I, might contribute to justice and kindness in our land.