

Out of the Mouth of Babes

In the name of great King David's greater Son, dear friends in Christ: Complete this sentence: "From out of the mouth of babes there sometimes come forth _____" ... That's right: *gems* – at least according to the old proverb. But to be quite frank, if you had asked me to complete that sentence when my own children were but babes, I would have given an entirely different answer. I was still in the Army back then, and it never seemed to fail. I'd be headed out the door in a rush to be at work on time and right about then my wife would hand me the baby and say, "Here, hug your daughter and give her a kiss goodbye." Then it would happen: uuuurrrp! All over my clean and freshly pressed uniform. Trust me: I didn't think of those little blobs of curdled milk as gems.

Still, I believe the expression refers to things very young children sometimes say. The older set may remember how Art Linkletter, on his television show *House Party*, had a regular segment called *Kids Say the Darndest Things*. In it he'd interview children anywhere from four to eight years of age just to see what kind of answers they'd give. (For those of us a bit younger, the same gig was redone more recently with Bill Cosby as host.) Anyway, owing to their misunderstanding of the world or their oversimplification of complex processes or their splicing together of bits and pieces of things they heard their parents say, sometimes what came out of their mouths were indeed gems of comedy. Other times, as I recall, kids would say things quite innocently that would make their parents hide their heads in embarrassment (which, incidentally, is why I don't do children's messages. I learned that lesson the hard way while on vicarage). But there were certain occasions on these shows, however, when, whether intentional or not, children would say things that displayed a wisdom far beyond that which you might expect from their tender years. These are the gems from the mouths of babes to which the old expression refers, I'm sure.

And that is exactly what we see going on in today's Gospel reading. So, let me set this up: It's the day of Jesus' triumphant entry into the city of Jerusalem. Last time Jesus was in town, about three months earlier, he had stood on the Temple courts and claimed to be none other than the God of Israel. The religious authorities rose up in indignation and tried to kill him on the spot. Jesus just walked away from them—but on his way out of the Temple grounds he restored the sight of the man born blind; thus, proving his claim even if his enemies were too blind to see it. Shortly thereafter, Jesus and his disciples left the city. Little was heard about him over the winter months. Just a few scattered rumors here and there and the old stories being retold and rehashed. People didn't know what to think. Maybe this Jesus was just another flash-in-the-pan prophet. Maybe his fifteen minutes of fame were over.

Then, all of a sudden, he was back. Just outside Jerusalem, only two miles away in the town of Bethany, Jesus raised up Lazarus who had been dead and buried for four days. There were hundreds of witnesses. Even some of his enemies were there and they couldn't deny it. So now the level of interest and excitement over Jesus that had been fading was through the roof. The people were bursting with expectation. Add to that the fact the city of Jerusalem was filled with pilgrims who had come to celebrate the Passover – that is, Jewish Independence Day: the commemoration of God's great deliverance of his people from slavery and oppression – and that many of these pilgrims had already seen Jesus in action in the earlier phases of his ministry around Galilee, and you can

understand the widespread hope that *now* was the time of fulfillment. The long-promised Messiah, the Savior of Israel, was here. His magnificent reign that would eclipse the splendor of Solomon's kingdom in its glory was about to begin.

And it was this sense of expectation that had the religious leaders and civil authorities in a panic. They had seen plenty of false messiahs come and go: little bands of fanatics gathered around a charismatic leader who fancied himself a warrior for the Lord. They rose up urging armed rebellion against the evil Roman occupation. And they all ended up the same way: cut down in a futile battle against overwhelming odds or, if they survived, captured and crucified along with the rest of their followers who had the misfortune to be caught alive. But all those had been comparatively small-scale operations out in the villages of the Judean hills. This one was huge. And it was happening right here in the capitol of Jerusalem. So the political and religious leaders were terrified of what the Roman response would be. It could mean the end of the nation. They were hoping against hope that Jesus would just disappear again, and their problems would go away.

No such luck. Instead he comes boldly into the city with an entire parade of his followers. They are waving palm branches, singing psalms, and casting their clothes before him to create sort of a makeshift red carpet. The significance of his riding a donkey does not escape his enemies. They know the prophecy of Zechariah. They know it better than his followers do. And they understand the significance of what the people are saying: "Hosanna to the Son of David". Hosanna means "save us now!" It's a cry of help in times of desperate need. And "Son of David" is the royal title of the Messiah. They are openly hailing Jesus as the King of Israel in defiance of their orders and Roman Law.

And in what's an even bolder move, Jesus leads this joyfully shouting procession straight to the Temple where he immediately sets about cleaning up the sacrilegious mess the priests allowed to go on in the outer courts. There they have turned the holy faith into a business enterprise—and a corrupt one at that. It's immensely popular with the people to see Jesus remove this festering canker sore from the face of the holy precincts. And then, just like in the good old days of his Galilean ministry, Jesus begins healing any and all who come to him. The Doctor is in and he's not turning anyone away. Or, to be more accurate, God is in his Temple and he's dealing with his people in mercy. Meanwhile a chorus of young voices continues to sing his praise. "Hosanna – save us now – Son of David!" And that's exactly what he's doing when they're saying it.

And here's the part that doesn't seem to make a lot of sense. I mean, the chief priests, the scribes, and the other leaders see him doing these miracles of healing. They're watching while he performs wonders. And they do not deny that he raised up Lazarus from the dead. Who but God alone could do that? They are watching the fulfillment of the sacred Scriptures they hold so dear and know so well, and yet they do not see. They are hearing the perfect praises of the little children echoing through the Temple courts, and yet they do not comprehend. They are witness to the fulfillment of God's promises, and yet they do not understand. Instead they are indignant with Jesus for his apparent audacity and terrified of what the consequences from the Romans will be. Pregnant in their question "Jesus, do you hear what these children are saying?" are the bigger questions, "Jesus, do you have any idea what you're doing and what grave danger you're placing us all in?"

In his response, he indicates that he knows exactly what he's doing and that he also knows who it is that is in grave danger. Beyond that, it is for Jesus the fulfillment of

yet another Scripture that they do not understand. “Have you never read, ‘Out of the mouths of infants and nursing babies you bring forth praise’?” It’s interesting: earlier in his ministry, when the seventy-two disciples he had sent out to prepare people to receive him returned, Jesus, full of joy through the Holy Spirit, said, “I praise you, Father Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and learned, and revealed them to little children. Yes, Father, for this was your good pleasure.”

And now that we see it happening yet again, it begs the question: Why is it God’s good pleasure that little children can see and understand so clearly what those who are wise and well educated cannot? And how is it that even nursing babies can raise praises to God while those whose job it is to lead the people in praise to God for his mighty works can see them happening before their eyes and then try to shut the people up?

The answer, in a word, is *dependency*. The single greatest sin of man is thinking that he is *in*-dependent, that he is on his own able to take care of himself both for his safety and wellbeing in this world and for his eternal salvation in the next. “It’s up to me; my strength, my wits, my good character and my behavior, *and I can do it.*” Which in turn is another way of saying, I don’t need to rely on God. And *that* is nothing but another way of saying, “I’m all the god I need.” And oddly enough it very often happens that the stronger, smarter, more educated and accomplished we get, the more likely we are to think that way. This is the problem with the religious leaders. They think it’s up to them to save the nation, and they think it’s up to them to save themselves through their proper understanding of and obedience to the Law of God.

And it wasn’t just the problem back then. Consider the history of western civilization. The most massive turning away from the holy faith corresponds precisely to that period of time mislabeled *The Enlightenment* – the time when they said, “man had come of age” and through his wisdom and scientific discoveries he had done away with the need for the silly myth called God. Then they had the monumental gall to name a previous period when almost everyone was a Christian *The Dark Ages*. Do you see how backward that is?

But then we expect there to be that sort of tension between the sacred and the secular. The real trouble begins when the same ideas of independence and “it’s up to us to do it all” creep into the church. This is what happened in the latter half of the nineteenth century when the so-called Bible scholars essentially wrote God out of the equation. They denied Creation, the flood, the stories of Israel’s history, the miracles of Jesus, his virgin birth, his resurrection, and they don’t believe in his second coming—and even today, if you want to be considered a serious Bible scholar in the most prestigious theological circles you have to start by denying all that – and they reduced the message of Jesus to “Be nice and try to get along with others”. The “Gospel” they proclaimed (and still do today) is, “It’s all up to you to make the world a better place. We can have heaven on earth if only we put into practice the principles Jesus taught. And we might as well have heaven on earth because there isn’t any hereafter.” It’s incredible. They call *that* the Christian *faith*. No, thank you.

Sadly, it’s not only the liberal side of church that wants to put the main focus of the faith on human wisdom and effort. The conservative side often leans toward it too. The most obvious example of this is legalism, which teaches that a person’s salvation depends on some combination of faith and works. I mention this trap fairly frequently because it shows up in so many variations and we’re all so susceptible to it; but what I’d like to point out today is a far more subtle form of this heresy, and that is when faith in Christ itself is

thought of as a human work. Many, perhaps most, conservative Christian Evangelicals in this country believe that it's only after a person has acquired a certain nearly adult level of understanding and mental acumen that he or she can possibly become a believer in Jesus. Only then, after hearing the pertinent facts about sin, God's grace, his forgiveness in Christ, and so on, they can process the information and make a decision for Jesus. But you see what the real question is here. It's, "Am I smart enough to accept the offer?" Which shifts the focus of salvation away from God's grace in Christ to my own good sense and proper decision. In the end, I am trusting myself for salvation. I'm depending on myself.

But true faith in Christ is all about dependency. It's believing that I'm helpless and that I cannot save myself. It's trust that God alone is the source of all good for everything I need in this life and for the next. And this is where little children have a leg up on us. They know they are one hundred percent dependent for everything. Consider the cries of an infant. What are they if not an expression of absolute dependency? The baby cannot say what it wants. It can't even begin to understand what it needs. But it does cry out with the expectation that its present discomfort will be attended. And through its parents God answers the prayers of the child. He feeds, cleans, clothes, and comforts the baby whose urgent cries for help are sweeter praise to his ears than the most polished performance of the finest professional choir.

I know, someone will protest, "But how can a mere infant even know who God is?" The answer: the same way he reveals himself to anyone – through his Word. Look, on a purely natural level a child immediately recognizes the voice of its parents. He or she can't understand what's being said, but they know who's speaking. And they trust that person. How much more then, on a supernatural level, when God gives the gift of the Holy Spirit through water and the Word can a child know and trust the Lord of Life? Of course, you don't want to leave it there. As children grow in intellect and ability they need more of the Word. They can and should spend an entire lifetime learning to know the Lord – the process is endless – but the one thing that ought never change is the sense of absolute dependency, of looking to God to fulfill all needs. And I think that it is owing to God's grace that in the latter years of life he often returns people to a state of physical and mental dependency to remind them of where they really stand.

The religious leaders at the time of Christ thought they could stand on their own both for their temporal and their eternal needs. They couldn't see the truth about themselves and therefore couldn't see the truth about Jesus. They didn't think they needed a Savior, and that is why they rejected him. And in so doing, they inadvertently instigated the chain of events by which Jesus gave his life to be our Savior from sin. But by God's grace we do see our need, and we do know Jesus as Savior and we trust him. Therefore, recognizing our weaknesses, and our sinful tendency to turn trust around to ourselves, let's repent of the times we've done exactly that. And let's ask our gracious God to cause us to grow to full maturity in faith and trust precisely by giving us an infant's sense of dependency. Then true gems of praise will flow forth from our mouths when we cry out our hosannas to our King. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!