

# *The Good News*

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## *“For What Will It Profit Them to Gain the Whole World and Forfeit Their Life?”*

*Editor: The following article was adapted from a sermon delivered on September 13 by The Reverend Ms. Margaret Schwarzer.*

On a recent Friday afternoon, an NPR journalist was interviewing a philosopher whose life work has been the objective study of the concept of justice. I tuned in too late to hear the speaker's name, but I did hear the journalist describe him as a Nobel prize winner, and the philosopher's voice was male and sounded as if he probably been on the planet for 50-60 years. During the ten minutes of the program I heard, he spoke about what he thought “justice” and “injustice” were made of in a variety of human spheres, and he took several calls and engaged listeners. On one occasion he made it clear that he was not at all religious, and took the secular humanist's suspicious attitude towards religion. Finally, however, the journalist asked him to speak about his own ideal of justice.

You can imagine my surprise when the philosopher said, “Well, as I've said, I'm not religious at all, but I'd direct you to the story of Jesus and the Good Samaritan in Luke.” And he went on to tell the story you and I know by heart. I almost forgot to brake at the red light my car and I were heading towards. Here was a Nobel Prize winning stranger, a self-proclaimed cool-headed, objective philosopher, and he was simultaneously asserting his lack of religious convictions while quoting chapter and verse from the Gospel of Luke. He told the story well, pointing out the obvious merits of the Samaritan—a natural antagonist of the Jews—who claimed the wounded man as his neighbor without ever having met the man before. Our non-believing philosopher was not ready to name Jesus as the son of God, but he was still clearly captivated by Jesus, still allowed himself to be shaped by the compassion, the wisdom and the yearning for what I would call the soulful and inclusive justice in the story of the Good Samaritan. I imagined that the philosopher understood Jesus as a kind of wise and impartial judge, like himself, who had truths to share about the substance and requirements of real justice.

It was a pleasure to hear an atheist speak about the merits of Jesus, and his story, and it reminded me of the early part of our Gospel text, Mark 8:25-37. Jesus says, “Who do people say that I am?” and his disciples answer him, “John the Baptist; and others, Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets.” It seems that times have not changed much. Many people continue to look at Jesus as one who calls for repentance like John the Baptist, or calls people to a moral and decent life, like the prophets, or shines by example, like Elijah. People are still finding and announcing many important aspects of Jesus to one another. (Continued on page 2)

## *Special Music on Sunday, September 27*

Peter Lea-Cox, English organist and conductor, will return to St. Mary's on Sunday, September 27 to lead a service of Morning Prayer at 10 a.m. As we begin a new program year, the service will celebrate the seasons of the Church Year with the music of J.S. Bach. The choir and congregation will sing chorales from the various seasons (Epiphany, Lent, Easter, Pentecost, Trinity), introduced by Bach organ preludes.

In Peter Lea-Cox's words, “Johann Sebastian Bach's mind probably combined the deepest understanding of the theological, spiritual and musical that has ever served the Lord Jesus. He would not have countenanced the idea of a service including music from all seasons of the Church Year. In this service, his Chorale Preludes will serve to focus our minds upon the substance of the hymns that we are about to sing.”

Following the service, Peter will lead an Adult Forum on “Bach and Spirituality,” a lecture that he gave recently at the “Bach Discovery Day” at Symphony Hall in Birmingham, UK, sponsored by the BBC. Please plan to join us on September 27 as we welcome Peter Lea-Cox for these special musical events!

## *“For What Will It Profit Them to Gain the Whole World and Forfeit Their Life?” (Continued)*

But Jesus asks Peter—and by extension—us, “But who do you say that I am?” We are meant to reply with Peter, “You are the Messiah.” We are meant to know a deeper truth. We are meant to understand that salvation comes with a price and that salvation is not cool and impartial, like an academic thesis, but intimate, incarnate, and expansive. We are meant to know that life itself is threaded through with opportunities for salvation, and that salvation makes demands upon us which are both real, and at times very painful.

In our Gospel passage, Jesus also says, “For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life? Indeed, what can they give in return for their life?” I don’t know where your mind wandered when you first heard these words, but my mind’s eye went directly to this past December 11<sup>th</sup>, the day the modern mascot of these words leapt onto the world stage. Bernie Madoff, with a last name that has a Dickensian ring: Madoff (as in “made off with the money”) admitted that he was a mastermind behind a \$20 billion to \$50 billion dollar Ponzi scheme. Within weeks, some people had killed themselves; many people woke up penniless; pension accounts had dried up; bank accounts earmarked for college educations had vanished, and luxury homes; and cars, boats, and jewelry were suddenly for sale at great discounts. The world as a whole, and the specific people individually involved, were reeling, and most of them still are reeling. When we consider that there are only 6.7 billion people on the planet, we begin to get a sense of the scope of his crime. Do the math: 7 goes into 20 about 3 times and into 50 about 7 times. To pay off his debt, Madoff owes the equivalent of between \$3.00 and \$7.00 to each and every person on the planet. The scope and cruelty of the crime are massive and unmistakably premeditated.

Several months ago, Robert Chow, a journalist at Time magazine, wrote: “Right now, people going through this tragedy are in the process of re-ordering their lives, re-evaluating their place on earth, trying to find a larger meaning.” I think that is true; we have friends who lost almost everything, and that is still what they are doing. That is what people have to do. I have deep respect for people who are ready to try to rebuild their lives when the unthinkable happens.

It is harder to know what to say, or how to respond to Madoff himself. Currently, our economy is still a mess, and many of us have lost stocks, or jobs, or at the least confidence or clarity around what is coming next. But this man stands out as someone who had blatant disregard for the Judeo-Christian values of integrity, honesty and piety. He broke a lot of the Ten Commandments over his thirty-year Ponzi scheme, and he broke other people’s lives—innocent lives—in the process.

I think the first thing we need to assert, as a Christian community, is that his actions—his greed, his egocentric narcissism, his lack of concern for his victims—all of these are an abomination before God. They are an absolute travesty of what God calls us to be in this life. In many ways, Bernie Madoff has fallen almost as far from God as a person can fall under their own free will.

But I think we also have to confirm that he is not a monster; he is not an inhuman devise of destruction and evil. The evil and destruction he has wrought are fantastically destructive and terrible, but he himself is still a human person: deeply broken, deeply flawed, deeply guilty of terrible crimes. But he, himself is human, and, because of his soulfulness, he is still able to be reached, and even loved, by God. Our culture needs to judge him in a court of law. But we do not need to pass judgment on his soul; that unimaginable task belongs to God, and not to us.

In our Gospel, Jesus is speaking the hard truth of his world to his disciples. He is telling them that, for a greater and divine good, he will undergo great suffering, be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes and be killed before he is raised again in three days. Peter, a close confidant of Jesus’, is deeply troubled by the pain and the sorrow in Jesus’ prediction, so Peter rebukes Jesus. I imagine Peter doesn’t want life to be so hard for a man he loves. I imagine that Peter’s intentions were good. The Gospel does not record Peter’s words, but Peter must have told Jesus not to speak of such a nightmarish scenario.

What is most important here is that Jesus knows himself to be tempted to act on Peter's kind but misguided invitation. This seems to be another moment—like that famous moment in the garden in Gethsemane—where Jesus would like the cup to pass from him if it possibly can. But here, surrounded by his disciples, confronting Peter, Jesus knows that the good that he would do will be accompanied by excruciating suffering and shameful death. Jesus is confirming that suffering is inevitable, even necessary, in his case.

If we are feeling brave today, we can each ask ourselves about the place or places in our own lives where we need to shout: “Get behind me, Satan.” Is there a place in your life where you would like to make the “comfortable and easy” choice, but secretly know that something more demanding—and possibly more painful—is being asked of you? Sometimes we can try to psychologize ourselves into imagining that if something is painful, we must be doing it wrong, but I don't believe that that is Gospel wisdom. The Gospel asks us to recognize that painful choices and real sacrifices are part of a mature spiritual life. While Noah builds an ark, he is jeered at and humiliated; while Abraham waits for his progeny, he turns 90; when Moses attempts to cross the Red Sea, the Egyptians are bearing down on him. Living in a situation that is painful does not necessarily mean that we are doing it wrong; it just may be a painful situation. The death of someone we love is like that; the mending of significant injustice is like that, a brokenness; like an addiction or a chronic illness is like that. Sometimes, the only way past something is by going through it. Jesus knows this. He tells Peter to get away from him, because Jesus does not want to fall into the temptation of an easier way.

There is no easier way for Jesus. If Jesus is going to serve God, there is nothing for him but a humiliating death on a cross. This grace is not cheap grace; this is grace that costs something, quite a lot. This is grace of wilderness and painful priority setting. Something must die for this grace to live and flourish. The giving of this grace requires endurance, and courage, and faith on Jesus' part. Jesus can choose to be authentic and engage the grace that will hold great pain but that will finally bend eternity, or he can listen to Peter and choose an easy and cheap pleasantness which will ultimately help no one. Jesus resists temptation and opens the way of salvation to us all.

When we find ourselves in dark places, “hoping against hope” for grace to reach us, we can count on the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob; we can count on the God of Jesus who keeps his promise to love humankind forever. There is no place that God will not go to find us. Like the patriarchs and matriarchs who lived before us, we are called to believe in the mighty dominion, the mighty judgment and the mighty promises of God.

### ***Our Sister Parishes***

*Editor: Each week we pray for our sister parishes, St. Luke's in Harare, Zimbabwe and Santa Maria Vergen in El Salvador. Both are in peril. Below is a blog from Nontando Hadebe, originally from Zimbabwe, who is now pursuing graduate studies in theology in South Africa. Second is an excerpt of a letter from Bishop Barahona of El Salvador accompanied by observations of members of last year's El Salvador team:*

#### **Flickers of Hope for Zimbabwe**

Most of the news coming from Zimbabwe is so discouraging and heartbreaking that it is becoming harder to sustain hope.

The growing number of Zimbabwean immigrants in neighboring countries is one of the many signs that the Government of National Unity is failing in its basic commitment to improve the welfare of its people. The migration of vulnerable groups such as unaccompanied children and people with disabilities makes the situation intolerable.

Overcrowding in neighboring countries and competition for scarce resources represent a time bomb, a disaster waiting to happen. In Zimbabwe, land invasions continue as well as lawlessness and violations of basic principles agreed upon in the unity agreement.

The tragedy of the situation is that it need not be this way. Zimbabwe has a wealth of natural resources, fertile land, strong infrastructure, and an educated and productive labor force. The knowledge that there is potential for the situation to change has prevented the flicker of hope from being extinguished. Thousands turned up for a rally organized by the opposition party within Zimbabwe, a sign to many within and outside Zimbabwe to keep going because as this African proverb puts it so well, “A flea can trouble a lion more than a lion can trouble a flea!”

### **Tragedy at Santa Maria Vergen in El Salvador**

Recently we received the sad news that during a medical team visit to Santa Maria Vergen in San Bartolo, unidentified persons entered the church and assassinated a young man, Alexander Canales, an active member of the church. We do not know the motives of this action but the members of Santa Maria Vergen have been deeply touched by this tragedy. In addition a woman who was receiving medical help was injured.

Alex impressed all of our team that traveled to El Salvador last year. He was a gracious member of the quartet that provided the lively music during the Holy Eucharist. On one occasion, some of our team wanted to investigate the neighborhood around the church. He insisted on accompanying us. When we witnessed an act of violence off in the distance, his immediate concern was our safe exit from the area. When we departed the country, he asked for email addresses to keep in touch. His immediate family resides in the US.

The Most Reverend Martin Barahona, Bishop of El Salvador, has since written, “This coming Saturday...we will have at St. Mary the Virgin an act of making amends, of ‘cleansing the temple,’ an act provided for in our canons when there has been a criminal event in our churches. At this event I will be joined by all of the Diocesan Clergy and also invited members of the other historic churches in El Salvador.

“We ask for your prayers that the congregation will recover its spiritual strength. The Reverend Julio Rivera has recovered his hope and energy, having been a witness to this killing. As Bishop I am full of spirit and confident in God and in God’s protection. As always everyone is welcome to El Salvador, and you will always have the help of the Church for your security.”

### *Upcoming Events*

#### **Donations of Coats to Rosie’s Place**

Rosie's Place, a homeless shelter and multi-service agency for women in Boston, is seeking used coats and jackets for their guests. The jackets and coats should be washed or cleaned. Additionally, if you have men's jackets, these can also be donated, as some women prefer this style, and these jackets may be in larger sizes. This will be an ongoing program and guests have already started asking for these items. Please contact Elisabeth Comer at 781-772-2220 or [ewcomer@verizon.net](mailto:ewcomer@verizon.net) if you have items to donate or leave them in the church office.

#### **Blessing of the Animals on Sunday, October 4th at 11:30 AM on St. Mary’s Front Lawn**

Come celebrate the gift that animals are to our lives and bring your favorite pet for a very special blessing at this celebration of the Feast of St. Francis. All sizes, shapes and types of God’s creatures are welcome and may even make a joyful noise unto the Lord! Feel free to invite friends and their pets to join us. In the spirit of stewardship and the parable of the Loaves and Fishes, on October 4, we will also collect contributions of pet food (dog and cat food only, please) for distribution to needy families through the Wellesley Food Bank (and perhaps others). Please put your donations in the baskets by the baptismal font.

### *Please Remember in our Prayers:*

Brian, Bob H., Catherine, Charlie, David, Don, Dorothy, Elizabeth, Harriott, Henry, Jerri, Jon, Joshua, the Walter Kennedy family, Liz, Margaret, Mary Ellen, Pat, Peter and Priscilla.

*Editor: Tim Green*