

Acts 9:1-6

Meanwhile, Saul was still breathing out murderous threats against the Lord's disciples. He went to the high priest ² and asked him for letters to the synagogues in Damascus, so that if he found any there who belonged to the Way, whether men or women, he might take them as prisoners to Jerusalem. ³ As he neared Damascus on his journey, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. ⁴ He fell to the ground and heard a voice say to him, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?"

⁵ "Who are you, Lord?" Saul asked.

"I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting," he replied. ⁶ "Now get up and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do."

John 21:1-19 Afterward Jesus appeared again to his disciples, by the Sea of Galilee.^[a] It happened this way: ² Simon Peter, Thomas (also known as Didymus^[b]), Nathanael from Cana in Galilee, the sons of Zebedee, and two other disciples were together. ³ "I'm going out to fish," Simon Peter told them, and they said, "We'll go with you." So they went out and got into the boat, but that night they caught nothing.

⁴ Early in the morning, Jesus stood on the shore, but the disciples did not realize that it was Jesus.

⁵ He called out to them, "Friends, haven't you any fish?"

"No," they answered.

⁶ He said, "Throw your net on the right side of the boat and you will find some." When they did, they were unable to haul the net in because of the large number of fish.

⁷ Then the disciple whom Jesus loved said to Peter, "It is the Lord!" As soon as Simon Peter heard him say, "It is the Lord," he wrapped his outer garment around him (for he had taken it off) and jumped into the water. ⁸ The other disciples followed in the boat, towing the net full of fish, for they were not far from shore, about a hundred yards.^[c] ⁹ When they landed, they saw a fire of burning coals there with fish on it, and some bread.

¹⁰ Jesus said to them, "Bring some of the fish you have just caught." ¹¹ So Simon Peter climbed back into the boat and dragged the net ashore. It was full of large fish, 153, but even with so many the net was not torn. ¹² Jesus said to them, "Come and have breakfast." None of the disciples dared ask him, "Who are you?" They knew it was the Lord. ¹³ Jesus came, took the bread and gave it to them, and did the same with the fish. ¹⁴ This was now the third time Jesus appeared to his disciples after he was raised from the dead.

¹⁵ When they had finished eating, Jesus said to Simon Peter, "Simon son of John, do you love me more than these?"

"Yes, Lord," he said, "you know that I love you."

Jesus said, "Feed my lambs."

¹⁶ Again Jesus said, "Simon son of John, do you love me?"

He answered, "Yes, Lord, you know that I love you."

Jesus said, "Take care of my sheep."

¹⁷ The third time he said to him, "Simon son of John, do you love me?"

Peter was hurt because Jesus asked him the third time, "Do you love me?" He said, "Lord, you know all things; you know that I love you."

Jesus said, "Feed my sheep. ¹⁸ Very truly I tell you, when you were younger you dressed yourself and went where you wanted; but when you are old you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will dress you and lead you where you do not want to go." ¹⁹ Jesus said this to indicate the kind of death by which Peter would glorify God. Then he said to him, "Follow me!"

Revelation 5:11-14

"Then I looked and heard the voice of many angels, numbering thousands upon thousands, and ten thousand times ten thousand. They encircled the throne and the living creatures and the elders.

In a loud voice they were saying: "Worthy is the Lamb, who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and strength and honour and glory and praise!"

Numbers matter a lot in the book of Revelation, so it is no accident that when the angels sing their praises to the lamb who was slain they say he is worthy to receive seven distinct things. Seven is the number of completeness, so besides these seven specific accolades and honours, the angels are saying that Jesus is worthy of every positive aspect of worship.

I want to focus on these honours, and the qualities of character that deserve these honours, and the contrasts: in Jesus, in Paul, in Peter, and in Pope Francis, who was a recent example of someone who bore these virtues to such an extent that he too was worthy of a lot of this praise. Let's begin, rightly, with Jesus.

Jesus, the lamb who was slain, in the language of Revelation, was worthy of power and wealth and wisdom and strength and honour and glory and praise. He was worthy of that at every single point, but in his incarnation and ministry he did not accord himself any of these things. He did not give himself a head start on the glory — he demonstrated this in his love, his prayer, his wise teaching, his miracles. At his transfiguration he allowed only his closest disciples to see his heavenly glory — the ones who already knew him. In the well loved-words of Philippians 2, Jesus “did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant...”

He deliberately did not wield power or strength or wealth, his wisdom was only understood by his followers but ran contrary to the so-called wisdom of many, and though he was feted by the followers who ‘got’ him, it was obviously not so widespread as to protect him from the false judgement and the cross of Good Friday.

It is that deliberate humility that makes Jesus **so** worthy of power, wealth, wisdom and the rest.

By contrast, the young Saul was clearly a man well on his way to all these honours in the eyes of the world he lived in. Highly educated, brain the size of a planet, ticking off the checklist of Pharisee honours and promotion, a capable and influential leader within the Jewish world... and then he met the risen Jesus on the road to Damascus. Acts gives us a very brief telling of the story, but the impact could not be more profound. When Jesus spoke to him on the road to Damascus he immediately understood that everything he had believed in and stood for was fundamentally wrong. If Jesus could speak to him then Jesus was alive and vindicated by the Lord and his teaching must be true. Saul's three day blindness added power to the words. A man brought up within the Greco-Roman world of Tarsus, near Antioch, almost certainly knew stories like that of Tiresias and of Oedipus, with the tragic irony that the sighted can see nothing until they are blinded, at which point they are able to see. The Lord's loving redemption is such that Saul's eyesight is restored to him, and he takes the new name, ‘Paul’. There is a significant message in his name change. Saul was the tall king who turned away from the Lord and lost the throne and God's favour. ‘Paul’, by contrast, means ‘short’. Paul probably was a short man, but he also became a very humble man, immediately turning away from the career ladder he had been pursuing, but becoming in the process, far more worthy of accolade under Jesus's newly reconstituted order of things, in which humility and service were worthier than pride or power. Powerful Saul made himself humble, in Jesus's image, to become the great missionary of the church.

Peter's story is that of the making of a leader. He was not a leader to begin with, but an eager follower. John's story in chapter 21, is, for me, one of the most wonderful in all the gospels. Dare I say I don't much care about the miraculous catch of fish? I care everything about the miraculous forgiveness of Peter, and Jesus's institution as the leader of the church. Peter was just a fisherman. He did not seek power, wealth, wisdom, strength. But he steered the church through the first few decades and was martyred for his troubles. Before his death, tradition has that he also became the first bishop of Rome, and therefore the first pope.

Peter did not have a palace, nor fancy robes nor any of the other trappings of power.

Power and the church is a complex subject. Too briefly I would suggest that the story on which our faith is founded is that of Jesus, making himself nothing, taking the role of a servant — to quote Paul's letter to the Philippians again. Christ is our role model in this. We elevate the best leaders and teachers, expecting them to be truly Christ-like Christians. But as we give them exalted positions we give them political power, honour, glory, wealth... the sort of qualities that can attract some, or corrupt others, and which can then outweigh the spiritual factors in the election of popes and archbishops, in favour of the politically expedient.

Pope Francis, whose funeral was last week, managed to be everything a pope should be. The sermon at his funeral noted his care for immigrants, for human dignity, for the environment, and his insistence that we should build bridges, not walls. That war is always a defeat for humanity. He managed to love with interest, compassion and humility. Many of us are aware that despite his illness, and the exhaustion of his role, he telephoned a church in Gaza daily to encourage them in their plight. Fewer people are aware how close his

relationship was with Bethlehem University — a Christian University in a muslim-majority part of the West Bank, surrounded by Israel's hostile walls. He wrote to them regularly, and in March the students wrote back to him, with prayers for his health, and affection.

Jorge Bergoglio (to give him his original name) did make mistakes. He did sin. He made errors of judgement as a cardinal in Argentina. But living in humble relationship with God he was able to repent and change, just as Paul and Peter both did.

When we read the Bible, one of the dangers we run is to look at the characters of the New Testament as if they were mythical heroes, having more in common with Heracles or Achilles, the Greek heroes, than with you or me. And that makes it hard for us fully to embrace them as role models. Pope Francis was one important case of a modern Christian who fully embraced *Christ* as a role model, and who understood *his* place as a role model for the world. Seeing him, many people saw more clearly what goodness really was. His legacy is in the faith, the hope, the persistent care for the dignity of all people which he shared with the world.

You and I also will leave a legacy — more modest, but real to those our lives have touched. We may not be ambitious to be worthy of power and wealth, wisdom and strength, honour and glory and praise... but we do wish to leave a positive legacy — to be remembered for good. To have done good. What might we learn about that from the humility of Paul, Peter, Pope Francis, and Jesus?

Amen.