

Delayed Understanding

I love Kay very much but she has one annoying habit. I'm watching Masterpiece Theater. I'm listening intently. The drama is at a crucial point. Nigel is just about ready to make an unexpected revelation about Ronald Merrick. I lean forward on the couch to catch every word. But just at the critical moment Kay walks in from putting the boys to bed and asks, 'What's going on?' I shush her because if I explain to her I'll miss what's going on while I'm explaining. I have to keep telling her that if she just waits and listens what she doesn't understand will be cleared up.

So much in our lives is like that. Life is a drama into which we walk after the show has begun. We are actors playing our part but who often don't understand why the author has us doing and saying certain things. We don't understand why the author has certain things happen to us. 'Why did that person speak so angrily to me when I've never said or done anything unkind to him as far as I know?' 'Why did this awful thing happen?' Often years go by before we begin to understand.

Something like that happens in our Scripture Lesson. It was the first Palm Sunday. Jesus was coming up the road to Jerusalem. People heard that Jesus had raised Lazarus from the dead. They were hoping he might be the promised messiah. When they saw Jesus coming they took palm branches and went out to meet him and cried, 'Hosanna! 'Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!' 'Blessed is the King of Israel!'. Jesus must have been enjoying all the attention. He eagerly joined in the celebration. He found a donkey and rode it into town like a king coming home from a victorious campaign.

Then the Evangelist makes an interesting observation. 'At first his disciples did not understand all this. Only after Jesus was glorified did

they realize that these things had been written about him and that they had done these things to him'. No doubt there was a sense in which they understood very well what the crowds were doing. They were hailing Jesus as king. But they didn't understand what kind of king Jesus was. They didn't understand that his throne would be the cross. They didn't understand the necessity of his death. They didn't understand the nature of his kingdom. This was something they came to understand only after Jesus was glorified and the Spirit was given. The amazing thing that this passage teaches is that we can be a true Christian and yet have very little understanding of who Jesus is and what he came to do.

Sometimes real Christians don't understand the Christian faith very well. You don't understand the bible and so, of course, you don't read it; and you have absolutely no interest in participating in a Bible study where your ignorance will be condescended to. You don't understand a lot of things in the worship service and so you don't have a lot of incentive to attend regularly. The teenager doesn't understand why his mom or dad make him go to Sunday school and church. So many don't understand why we have to go to church and pray and read the Bible and go to church to worship, and receive the sacraments in order to be a good Christian.

If you are one of these Christians you sometimes feel that the spiritually elite in the congregation write you off as one of the reprobate. Word gets back to you that they are praying for your salvation. And yet when I talk to you personally I sense real faith. I sense a real love for Christ however groping it may be. I sense a questing spirit. I sense a spirit of humility when we talk about God which is so refreshing. I sense that it was people like you whom Jesus chose to be his disciples rather than those who had all the answers. And so often I see in you more of the

fruit of the spirit, of love, joy, peace, longsuffering, then Christians who have a wealth of understanding.

Sometimes you come to church for years, most of the time on the periphery of church affairs, largely unnoticed. Sometimes you drift away altogether. You may go on like this for years. But then something happens in your life and you begin to understand and grow as Christians. Some

morning you're out in the woods fishing and you are overwhelmed with a sense of God's presence and grace. Or you are sitting at the dinner table with friends and family, eating, drinking, and laughing and it occurs to you how wonderful life has been, how lucky you have been, how good God is. Or maybe some tragedy comes into your life and you begin to understand how important the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ is. Sometimes it happens during the worship service. One woman I know was reciting the Apostles'

Creed during the worship service. All of a sudden she began to understand what she had believed all those years and she enter a new season of growth in her life. Somewhere and somehow you catch a fleeting vision of Christ and his love for you and you begin to understand how much God loves you.

I opens minds to understand
This phenomenon of delayed understanding is a great encouragement to me in my ministry. I really do care about people growing as Christians and coming to a better understanding of what it means to serve Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. I really pray that all of us would discover the part we can play in building Christ's kingdom through witness and service.

I get frustrated trying to figure out how to motivate people to learn more about Christ and grow in the Christian faith. But every once in a while I see *I opens the mind to* this principle-of-delayed understanding in the life of one of my parishioners.

Several years ago I got a letter from someone I remember as a very quiet, shy high-school girl. She didn't have much to say in Sunday school class. I figured she was there because her parents made her come. I wondered if she got anything out of the class or my sermons. But in her letter she spoke of a sermon I had given on a passage from Galatians. She didn't understand it when she heard it as a teenager. Her letter went on to say that after I left that church, she graduated from high-school and went to college. Near the end of her last year in college something or Someone led her to turn to her dusty Bible and begin reading Paul's letter to the Galatians. She began to remember the sermon I had preached years before. She began to understand what Paul was saying. In short she the glory of Christ and his Gospel. Since then we have been writing back and forth to one another. She tells me what she's reading and thinking and how she's growing as a Christian. That's an example of delayed understanding. I believe she was a real Christian for years but simply didn't understand much of what it means to confess Christ as Lord. It's exciting to think that this kind of thing happens even when I don't know about it.

*... something that
admit herself
that she was
unable to
accept...
something that
filled her
with fear &
self-loathing*

And so it may be with some of you. You don't really get much out of Sunday school or worship or the sermons and get something or Someone keeps bringing you back. You don't have to come to church. You could stay home, you could sleep in. But you have been drawn here. There's so much you don't understand. But God is at work in you, planting the seed of understanding, and down the road, God is going to cause that seed to grow and sprout and develop into something beautiful for him and you will see the glory of Christ.

*Sometimes
Maybe you don't even understand me that Jesus must die so that we could have*

But sometimes we regret our delayed understanding. Sometimes we look back over our lives and, with regret, we remember how insensitive we

were to a parent or a spouse or a child. We say to ourselves, "Now I understand, but if I had understood at the time I would have done things differently. I would have spoken with more compassion". I think of my father. When I was in high-school I use to get so angry with my father for some of the things he did. Sometimes he would go to the store for something and not come home for hours. My mother and I would ask him where he had been and what he had been doing. He would say he couldn't remember. I would yell at him and call him a liar. A couple years later though I learned that he was a victim of premature senility. He would leave the house and get lost. I didn't understand at the time, but when I did understand I regretted how insensitive I had been.

I sense something of this in the comment of the Evangelist, in our scripture lesson; a note of regret, of sadness, of remorse. As John thinks back to that first Palm Sunday he regrets that he and his friends didn't understand. How little they appreciated at the time the tremendous things that were happening around them. If they had only understood what kind of a king he was. If they had only understood what he had been saying about his suffering and death. If they had only understood what they were doing to him; how they all forsook him and fled; How Peter, James, and John had fallen asleep in Gethsemane; how Peter denied him; how Thomas doubted. But afterwards they remembered what they had done to him. And there was some bitterness in that memory.

There is always bitterness in recalling how little we appreciated our opportunities, our friends, our loved ones, until they were all gone. We think with sadness of what might have been if we had understood. "Oh, if I had only known that he was going to die." "Oh, if I had only known what anxiety and turmoil was going on inside of her." "Oh, if I had only realized

that he was suffering so much stress and tension. I'm so sorry it took me so long to understand'. And so it is when you finally come to see the glory of Christ and come to understand all that Christ has been doing in your life without you thanking him or recognising his presence from day to day

But I believe there was also happiness in the memory those disciples had of that dramatic day, that first Palm Sunday. When Jesus was glorified they remembered and relived that day. Then they remembered that they had been the ones to accompany the King. They had been the ones to have a part in the fulfillment of prophecy; and a glad and thrilling memory it must have been. So I hope it will be for all of us in the distant ages to come. You may remember that all the bright events of your life were part of a divine plan and purpose, and that the best of all your experiences were those which you enjoyed in the company of Christ and consisted in what you had done for Him.

Let us pray: O God, by whom the meek are guided in judgment, and light rises up in darkness for the godly: Grant us, in all our doubts and uncertainties, the grace to ask what you would have us to do, that the Spirit of wisdom may save us from all false choices, and that in your light we may see light, and in your straight path may not stumble; through Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen.*

A sermon preached by the Revd. Theodore S. Atkinson at Knox Presbyterian Church on Palm Sunday, March 31, 1985. Scripture Lessons for the day: Isaiah 50:4-9a; Psalm 31:9-16; Philippians 2:5-11; John 12:12-16.