

Discerning the Truth Regarding Human Affairs

In Christianity the figure of Jesus is viewed in continuity with the prophetic tradition of ancient Israel. Born in humble circumstances, Jesus spends most of his career proclaiming his message among the “people of the land,” not the “urban elites” in Jerusalem. He gathers a following of largely undistinguished disciples from various walks of life. Finally, his mission takes him to the center of national life, Jerusalem, the capital city, where he receives a mixed reception, then is seized and executed by the Romans. Complicit in his death are some religious and political rulers of his own people, including Sadducees (the economic and political power elite), and Pharisees (the intellectual and cultural elite). It is hardly the first time that a prophet is rejected by those with vested interests and power.

One might draw various insights from this story. The one I wish to invoke pertains to truth in human affairs. Such truth is hard to find in the centers of power. It tends to flourish at the margins. Speakers of truth who arise in the circles of power typically are displaced to the margins. Speaking truth to power is a marginalizing activity. It has been noted that Jesus was not crucified for saying, “Consider the lilies, how they grow,” but for saying, “Consider the thieves (in the temple), how they steal.” His attention to human injustices made him a problem for the authorities. He was subjected to the most extreme form of marginalization, death by torture.

We would all do well to remember this crucial insight from the Christian and Jewish traditions: Truth regarding human affairs is not likely to be found in the centers of power. One might better find it at the margins, where it can arise and exist relatively free from the insidious influences of wealth, power, and position.

A similar lesson derives from the fairy tale of the Emperor’s New Clothes. In that story, only the young child, whose perceptions are not subject to the vanities of self-regarding adults, is able to discern the obvious truth.

Let us never forget that we are capable of denying the most obvious truths about ourselves, precisely because we are often unable to see what exists plainly before us. And we are often unable to see such things because we are unable to countenance our own folly or unwilling to risk marginalization at the hands of our own compatriots.

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