

A MOST SURPRISING VERSE ABOUT CHRISTMAS

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When Jesus was in his thirties – he said these words: “You know that those who are regarded as rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them.”

At this point we can imagine Jesus’ disciples nodding their heads – they totally understood this, their lives were controlled by the power and cruelty of Gentile rulers. Whether by calling a census, or ordering taxes to be paid, or the ever present Roman soldiers on the roads, all of this was a reminder that the current king had to be honoured, leaders must be honoured – that’s how life worked.

And in one sentence, the Lord Jesus is about to overturn hundreds of years of accepted leadership theory. Where everybody else thought that leadership was about subduing enemies and gaining honour, Jesus is about to move the goal posts. While the disciples are all nodding their heads in agreement about Gentile rulers and their ways, Jesus slams them with a ‘Not so with you’.

The Son of Man did not come to be served

Jesus makes jaws hit the floor with his astounding claim that honour and greatness come by serving. Servanthood, slaving for others’ sake, leads to the highest honour. He says it again in slightly different words: “Whoever wants to be first must be the slave of all.”

Even though Servant-Leadership is a familiar idea it is still it hard to accept. It is hard to believe that it might really work the way Jesus says it does. How powerful it would be if we saw someone with superior leadership qualities come and serve – wouldn’t that put flesh and blood on this crazy idea? Not mere lip service to a revolutionary idea, but actual sweat and blood in the act of serving.

And here I direct you to the most astounding Christmas verse ever: “For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve and give his life as a ransom for many” (Mark 10:45).

Jesus talks about himself (using his common phrase: ‘the Son of Man’), and he says that he came to serve. If ever there was someone with undeniable leadership qualities; if ever there was someone who deserved to be honoured and acknowledged and loved – this is the guy. But he’s not sitting back in an easy chair, with one slave fanning him and another slave feeding him grapes. He’s not here to have someone bring him a beer, lie by the pool and have a second helping of pudding. That’s not why he came.

When Jesus makes his pitch for servant leadership, he is putting his own flesh and blood on the line. Not even Jesus is exempt from the goal of servant leadership. Greatness for Jesus will come by serving others. The shepherds may have rejoiced at his birth, wise men may have given him gifts and crowds may have flocked to hear him teach – but honour and greatness did not come that way for Jesus. The path to greatness and glory is paved with serving, slaving and giving up.

The Son of Man came to give his life as a ransom

A ransom is the payment to secure freedom. That's the image that Jesus now uses to explain the deepest and most profound service he renders us. This is the utter joy of Christmas: that Jesus' purpose in coming, *his* reason for Christmas, is to give everything he has to secure our freedom.

If fear is holding you captive; if guilt has you tied in knots; if anxiety keeps you trapped and self-hatred locks you up – then here is the ransom: Jesus. From the moment of his birth he is driving towards his death.

If feeling distant from God has kidnapped you; if worry about the future or family suffocates you; if envy keeps you captive and greed snatches your heart – then look at the ransom that Jesus offers. The infant in the manger comes to set you free.

That baby in Mary's arms is the ransom for many. This baby will be our key to freedom. And just like it feels surprising to think that greatness comes by serving, so it is surprising to imagine that Jesus offering himself to die on a cross two thousand years ago has anything to do with your freedom – today.

Yet this surprising idea turns out to be a compelling reason why Jesus came, why we have Christmas at all – a bold assertion that you and I are trapped, kidnapped by all sorts of feelings and actions, fears and thoughts. And the freedom we need (the freedom we wish we could generate for ourselves – but never can), is handed to us in this baby. This man, fully God, offers to set us free, to pay the price that lets you walk away from slavery to selfish-sin, and walk into the secure arms of your heavenly Father.

This is an astounding truth: that one baby, born in some unremarkable town, two thousand years ago, has everything to do with our freedom and our security. You can find it in Jesus, and I would say that you can *only* find it in Jesus.

By The Reverend **Jonathan Holt**