

Being nice to God or God being nice to us?

If you're selecting people for a team, then you generally select the best players first before someone else gets them. Everyone knows what being selected first or last means – those whom the group prizes are chosen first and if you're towards the end or the last person then you are viewed as being able to contribute least.

Now by definition, if God was on the selection list, I suspect he would be chosen first. In fact in the world of sides and teams, them and us, you can only be on one side, and hence God would be a prize asset. Looked at in reverse, we might ask "Which side is God on?". I remember reading a poem written at the time of the First World War by J C Squire which went:

*God heard the embattled nations sing and shout:
'Gott strafe England' – 'God save the King' –
'God this' – 'God that' – and 'God the other thing'.
'My God', said God, 'I've got my work cut out.'*

If a person's world accepts the presence of God in it, then it seems one of our default positions is our expectations and hope that God should be helping us when we get into difficulties. He should look after our interests. Ever wondered how God answers the prayers of neighbours? One who prays for sunshine and the other who prays for rain for the same place and time? And because we live in a world of cause and effect, and actions bring about consequences, and effort should result in some sort of reward, religious people can sometimes slip into the idea of thinking that by their being religious God should favour them and do the right thing by them. I mean why else be obedient to God but to get something from God?

In a brief parable, Jesus told his disciples to be careful with any sort of thinking that suggests that God owes them anything. The reason he taught them this was because if we choose God on our side – and we do that by doing religious things or rather the things of the religion – then we want God to play his best, to do the right thing by us. And Jesus was saying that God doesn't owe us anything.

[Jesus said] "Will any one of you who has a servant ploughing or keeping sheep say to him when he has come in from the field, 'Come at once and recline at table'? Will he not rather say to him, 'Prepare supper for me, and dress properly, and serve me while I eat and drink, and afterward you will eat and drink'? Does he thank the servant because he did what was commanded? So you also, when you have done all that you were commanded, say, 'We are unworthy servants; we have only done what was our duty.'" (Luke 17:7-10, ESV)

It sort of sits you back on your heels to hear that God isn't a genie that comes at our beck and call or does what we want because we're on his side. All the talk of servants doing what they're supposed to seems to rob us of any incentive to be pleased with and productive for God. It challenges religion's relevance if God is not going out of his way to help us. I bet those servants were hot and tired from ploughing the fields and looking after the sheep. If you've still got to get supper ready, what's the point of being religious?

Every religion, of course, has answers for my questions. I find it intriguing that Jesus lived his life as a servant to those around him while always remaining teacher and later 'Lord'. Jesus cared for people because he chose to not because he was obligated to. He ploughed, shepherded, fished, and attended to supper. Leaving the analogy, Jesus even accepted an illegal and unjust lynching – dressed up to look legal and just – not as a poor-me victim of tragedy but as a rescuer who wanted to defeat the power of sin and death to dominate human life.

And Jesus still serves people today – he has risen! – through the Bible, Baptism, and Holy Communion – so that they, in turn, can serve others and discover living with a freedom that was not thought possible. But as we are creatures of habit and since we do not lose our self centred perspective on things when we become Christians, since we daily sin, we remain in danger of picking Jesus for our team in the morning if we have a tough day ahead and perhaps leaving him on the bench if we want to have a good time or do things ourselves. We are called to remember our baptism each day – return to it each day – by that we all know that means live each day as a child of God – and that starts with repentance but perhaps we can also turn it a smug insurance policy or a club membership or a force field that should let us do what we want. Jesus’ parable confronts us with the home truths that God is boss or Lord and in comparison to God, we are unworthy servants. This is a perspective of Christianity and Christian living that seems far from the “I love you’s” we expect.

At Holy Communion, we’re taught to prepare – sort of like washing your hands before a meal – revisit the 10 Commandments as a check list of our lives – an honest mirror on our behaviour. We’re taught to be worthily prepared to receive Jesus – to come to grips with the personal truth from the past week that we are unworthy to receive him, that we are sinners – worthy preparation is being aware that we are unworthy. Yet again we can slip into restaurant mentality and decide to choose Jesus from the menu so to speak – sometimes perfunctorily or see communing as the sign of club membership reflecting our worthy status and we forget that in Jesus’ body and blood we receive medicine – medicine of immortality and the antidote against death. We take the medicine because we carry sin and death in our bodies and if left unchecked it will kill us. Sin hides and twists and blames others and minimises our responsibility and wants to look good and we need to the mirror of the 10 Commandments to show us where we are unworthy. For Lutherans, worthy participation at the altar is only for those who say of themselves “we are unworthy servants; Lord, have mercy on me, a sinner”.

It is strange. God doesn’t owe us. We don’t earn his blessings. And yet he serves us and gives us a way of living that is worth every heart beat. That is grace – his underserved love. Such talk lifts us high and encourages us and well it should and yet there is a paradox as well for as sinners we can distort and twist God’s grace from gift to wage – and think and act that God should be on my side because I’m not so bad as many others – and so God never takes us away from the cross. That is where he will only be found. That is what confronts us most of all – God died for us as the only way to rescue us (we were that far gone) and living with him each day is a recognition of the length and sacrifice he made.

“We are unworthy servants” is not a mantra of the masochistics but a 20-20 statement – no rosy coloured glasses please – about sin – I am unworthy of such love, grace, and favour. How we live as followers of Jesus does not build up our reward or heavenly superannuation – instead this side of eternity we need this perspective to keep the cross of Jesus in focus. And with that in focus, then we can get on with living.