



July 25, 2004

## Invitation

Matthew 11:28-29 [KJV]; Romans 5:1-5 [NRSV]

### Exordium

Helen Keller—blind, deaf, and non-oral since her infancy:

*For three things I thank God every day of my life: thanks that he has vouchsafed [granted] me knowledge of his works; deep thanks that he has set in my darkness the lamp of faith; deep, deepest thanks that I have another life to look forward to—a life joyous with light and flowers and heavenly song.<sup>1</sup>*

### Invitation to a Beheading

The young man's name is Cincinnatus C. He has been condemned to death for the ambiguous offense called "gnostical turpitude," an imaginary crime that defies definition but, at first blush, implies an intellectual depravity. The method of his execution will be that of **beheading**. Cincinnatus spends his last days in an absurd jail, where he is visited by imaginary jailers, an executioner who masquerades as a fellow prisoner, and by his in-laws, who lug their furniture with them into his cell.

The unsettling title of the novel is *Invitation to a Beheading*, written by the inventive, prolific twentieth century author Vladimir Nabokov.

When Cincinnatus is led out to be executed in the presence of the ever-growing crowd of townspeople who have responded to the invitation, he mounts the platform on his own, lies face down upon the smooth, sloping slab of polished oak with his arms outstretched, and begins to count to ten. As his primary executioner, M'sieur Pierre, raises the axe for the mighty swing, Cincinnatus reflects on his circumstances and asks: "Why am I here? Why am I lying like this?"

As you and I know, bold action is sometimes unleashed by audacious inquiry; so by way of answer to these questions, Cincinnatus raises himself up, looks around, and simply **wills** his executioners out of existence; they disappear, along with the whole fantastical world they inhabit.

Nabokov published this story in 1938. How uncanny that its central theme—set in a previous century—bears the identical marks of televised agonies portrayed in 2004!

Over sixty hostages have been seized by militants in Iraq or Saudi Arabia, and at least eight have been beheaded, including, among others, Kim Sun-il from South Korea and Americans Jonathan Berg and Paul Johnson. As the video tapes are aired with coercive conditions stipulated by hooded militants, the condemned man, usually blindfolded, awaits his fate or pleads for his life.

It is a televised **invitation** to a beheading. It is an agony beyond human comprehension. It is a folly deeper than original sin. It is an atrocity larger than collective despair. While each video tape appears and rolls on, how readily comes to our lips the Robert Burns' refrain *Man's inhumanity to man makes countless thousands mourn*;<sup>2</sup> how tempting to succumb to Nabokov's fatalism that observes *the cradle rocks above an abyss, and common sense tells us that our existence is but a brief crack of light between two eternities of darkness*;<sup>3</sup> how ruefully we might quip: there but for the grace of God go I, or thank God it isn't my son or my father or my husband or my brother.

While there resides a stinging truth in the Russian proverb that *the tears of a stranger are only water*, we—the viewers—ordinarily react with an identification so powerful—so filled with revulsion and pain—that our dispositions deflate, our psyches numb, our minds reel at the unspeakable horror of the moment and at the uncanny parallels to Nabokov's *Invitation to a Beheading*.

As with Cincinnatus, the hostages' imaginary crimes defy definition, their executioners are masquerading in hoods, their jailers are ludicrous beyond imagination, and their plight is brought into the same room with their families on their families' televisions in their families' living rooms. And before their families' eyes, these sacred lives—held captive—are reduced to **dispensable** pawns in a despicable, political power parlay.

There is one critical difference, however, between Nabokov's story and these 21<sup>st</sup> century agonies: while the reality of the hostages' dilemma may seem surrealistic, none of them—no, not one of the hostages—is able to simply **will** his executioners out of existence and walk away.

### **Defining Moments**

This topic warrants a pause here. The intent of this sermon is not essentially to rail at the absurd or to bemoan current atrocities, or to contrast methods of human cruelty in two different centuries. Our purpose here, rather, is to acknowledge the universality of defining moments in specific critical incidents—that is to say that everyone is confronted at some time in his/her life with defining moments—and to attest that Christ comes to us in those desperate circumstances, no matter how dire or drastic.

#### The Hostages' Defining Moments

Beneath the blindfold, the hostage's eyes must be searching in the darkness for some viable answer to the questions: Why am I here? Why am I lying or sitting like this in a place I don't want to be, in a circumstance I cannot fathom, in a reality too severe to embrace, in an experience carrying me toward an outcome beyond my control by a demonic force putting an end to a life I crave to fulfill; and, ultimately, how shall I meet this death?

And if his eyes search **intently** enough into the darkness, he may also ask: What do I believe that makes me who I am in this defining moment? Whom shall I trust to carry me through the darkness into the Light? If he is Christian, he may also ask: How shall I practice the presence of God and exercise the mind of Christ to die with unflinching courage and unflagging confidence?

Defining moments in desperate circumstances!

We know from our personal experiences that it is most often the desperate—or at least the **challenging** circumstances—in which the defining moments arise. Those are the moments in which our faith is tried and our metal is tested, when God's refiner's fire burns out the impurities and turns out the finest gold.

### Our Defining Moments

In spite of escalating dangers in our present world, it is perhaps safe to assume that none of us here will ever have to face such a fate as has come to many of the hostages—although, no guarantee; and we pray for a time and for a world in which that very fate may never again come to any others. Having said that, however, there are significant parallels in our own lives that cause us to identify with those who find themselves in a place they don't want to be, in a situation they cannot control.

Each of us now—or in the past, or in the future—experiences those defining moments in challenging circumstances where our faith, our metal, our courage are put to the test.

What is that challenging circumstance for you?

For some of us it is a **ravaging disease**, slowly progressing or suddenly upon us, hurrying us to an untimely end. For others of us it is the **loss of a spouse** with whom we have shared the deepest intimacy for numerous years, and the ensuing loneliness that makes the nights longer and darker. For others of us it is the inexplicable **loss of a child**, whose bedroom door remains ever open, whose single bed remains ever made, whose footsteps are never heard again upon the front doorstep and whose visage is never seen again round the glowing hearth. For others of us it is the perpetual state of **unwanted joblessness**, perhaps due to a declining economy or an unintended condition or incident. For others of us it is the **empty marriage** or the **abusive marriage** with no exit in sight; or perhaps the **unexpected divorce** that came out of the blue. For many of us in this room, it is the unwelcome state of **aging**: that stage that *shifts into the lean and slipper'd pantaloons, with spectacles on nose and pouch on side . . . our voices turning again toward childish treble, pipes and whistles in our sounds, foreshadowing a second childishness and mere oblivion.*<sup>4</sup>

Last month I attended my 45<sup>th</sup> college reunion. What a sobering experience! I confess that there was little comfort derived from seeing that some classmates looked older than I; it was an immeasurable consternation for me to see that others looked younger. I came home and began using a wrinkle-retarding face cream and have developed a riveting fascination with the television program titled *Extreme Makeovers*.

Why am I here in this stultifying aging process, in this empty marriage, in this unbearable loss and sorrow, in this cruel night, in this despicable inertia of unemployment and untapped skills, in this diseased body that once was filled with life and dancing and vitality?

Why am I lying or sitting like this in a place I don't want to be, in a circumstance I cannot fathom, in a reality too severe to embrace, in an experience carrying me toward an outcome beyond my control—perhaps even, it appears, by a demonic force putting an end to a life I crave to fulfill; and how shall I meet this death or the horrendous negative result of this dilemma?

And if our eyes search intently enough into the darkness, we may also ask  
What do I believe that makes me who I am in this defining moment? Whom shall I trust to carry me through the darkness into the Light? How shall I practice the presence of God and exercise the mind of Christ to **endure** with unflinching courage and unflagging confidence?

Everyone experiences defining moments in specific critical incidents, and Christ comes to us in those desperate circumstances, no matter how dire or drastic.

### **Invitation to Hope**

Christ comes to us with an invitation to hope: *Come unto me all ye that labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn of me, for I am meek and lowly in heart, and you shall find rest unto your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.*

Our CMU Campus Minister, Chris Cooke, has introduced many of us to Rob Bell's dynamic ministry. Rob Bell is the 33-year old pastor of a 15,000 member church in Grandville, Michigan, where he preaches an orthodox Christian message from the prophets, rabbis and the Christ to confront our postmodern culture, all the time using an unorthodox style that employs images and personal stories.

In one of his recent short, dramatic videos, Bell conveyed a magnificent insight about discipleship.

“When we use the word *disciple*,” he said, “we often mean student, but we generally mean someone who knows what the teacher knows. Yet *Disciple* is something far deeper. The disciple just doesn't want to know what the rabbi knows; the disciple wants to be like the rabbi and wants to learn to do what the rabbi does. Rabbis (in Jesus' day) differed in how they interpreted the Torah. Different rabbis had different sets of interpretations of how they lived out and understood and interpreted the scriptures. [Mark this insight of Bell's:] **A rabbi's set of interpretations was called that rabbi's yoke**, so when you went to apply to a rabbi to become that rabbi's disciple, you wanted to take that rabbi's yoke upon you so that you could learn to know what the rabbi knows in order to do what the rabbi does in order to be like the rabbi. [In considering a would-be disciple, the rabbi must ask himself:] Can this person do what I do? Can this person spread this yoke?”<sup>5</sup>

When Jesus chose his disciples, he believed that they indeed could take his yoke upon them, that they could learn of him, that they could come to know what he knew, that they could come to do what he did, and they could come to be like their master.

Jesus the Christ chooses you and me to be his disciples with an invitation: *Come, follow me*; and he believes that we can indeed take his yoke upon us, that we can learn of his understanding of his Father, that we can learn of the power of his presence, that we can take on the mind of Christ, that we can do what he does, that we can be like him even in the most challenging of circumstances.

If Mal Gibson's portrayal of "The Passion of the Christ"—whatever the controversial milieu in which it made its appearance—did nothing else, it made it perfectly and graphically clear that Christ has done it before us: that he has been blindfolded, threatened, struck, beaten, scourged, nailed in agony to a tree; that he has experienced loss, betrayal, broken relationships, the death of family and friends; that he has suffered the worst of the worst of the worst and has borne up under his defining moments in the most horrific of circumstances because he and the Father are one, because he is an eternal being, because there is no division between the natural world and the supernatural world.

Now, these days he makes his way into our worst of times during our defining moments in the direst of circumstances and issues the brightest invitation to hope in the darkest nights of despair: *Come unto me, all ye that labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn of me. . .* virtually saying to us: you can know what I know, you can do what I did, you can be like me.

*Suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us.*

Paul is writing of your suffering and of mine. He is speaking of his suffering and the suffering of those in the first century church who are being persecuted, tortured, beheaded, slain, thrown to the lions for their unrenounced faith in Jesus Christ as Lord.

Actually, it isn't a **casual** writing about their suffering and ours; it is, rather, a **boasting** of their suffering since the ultimate result is a resolute hope of sharing the glory of God, sharing eternity with the Father.

Last week while discussing this sermon with a close friend over lunch, he reminded me of Wayne Dyer's theological perspective, that is, an intentional recognition of ourselves as eternal beings: "as people who are here forever and connected to God, the Source of all life, we are infinite spiritual beings having a temporary human experience rather than human beings having occasional spiritual experiences." Dyer goes so far as to contend that "when our experience of life is guided by fear of death, a separation from others, a competitive style, and a need to dominate and be a winner," then we in effect separate ourselves from the power of the living God who intends eternal continuity for all whom he has created. Dyer offers this admonition: *Just let go of the idea that you're a body that's destined to die, and instead seek an awareness of your immortal self*, which, Paul would insist, is the concrete hope of sharing the glory of God, a hope that will not disappoint us.<sup>6</sup>

*If the doors of perception were cleansed, asserts William Blake, everything would appear to man [us] as it is: infinite.*<sup>7</sup>

Today, 25 July, a significant branch of the Christian Church celebrates the feast of James the Apostle, Son of Zebedee, one of Jesus' most intimate disciples, who, after Jesus' death and resurrection, first preached in Judea and Samaria and then in Spain. Upon his return to Judea, where he preached again with increased zeal the message of Christ crucified, James came face to face with the hostility of the then current high priest, Abiathar, who incited the mob against James, caused a rope to be thrown about his neck and dragged him before Herod Agrippa, who, in turn, condemned him to death by beheading, a martyrdom that occurred on 25 March.

It was a critical, defining moment for James the Apostle. He couldn't simply **will** his executioners out of existence and walk away . . . nor did he particularly want to. With his eyes on the resurrected Christ, the Source of his eternal life, he undoubtedly accepted Christ's invitation—*come unto me, all ye that labor and are heavy laden*—he *shuffled off this mortal coil*,<sup>8</sup> boasted of the suffering that produces endurance that produces character that produces hope, and then—with a completely satisfied hope—James the Apostle entered into a great and magnificent arena of the glory of God.

*It is a far, far better thing that I do, than I have ever done; declares Sydney Carton on his way to a similar fate, it is a far, far better rest I go to than I have ever known.*<sup>9</sup>

### Conclusion

*Come unto me all ye that labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest . . .*

It is an invitation to hope that does not disappoint us.

So, for three things we can thank God every day of our lives: thanks that he has granted us knowledge of his works; deep thanks that he has set in our darkness the lamp of faith; deep, deepest thanks that we have another life to look forward to—a life joyous with light and flowers and heavenly song.<sup>10</sup>

### Notes

#### (Endnotes)

<sup>1</sup> Cited by Philip Yancey in *Rumors of Another World*

<sup>2</sup> Robert Burns' poem *Man Was Made to Mourn*, stanza 8

<sup>3</sup> Vladimir Nabokov, *Speech*

<sup>4</sup> Shakespeare, *As You Like It*, II, vii, 139ff

<sup>5</sup> Rob Bell, *Dust*

<sup>6</sup> See Wayne Dyer, *The Power of Intention*, pp. 118- 119, 128

<sup>7</sup> Cited by Wayne Dyer, *The Power of Intention*, p. 127

<sup>8</sup> Shakespeare, *Hamlet III*, i, 67

<sup>9</sup> Charles Dickens, *A Tale of Two Cities*, last lines

<sup>10</sup> Adapted from Helen Keller