

THE LAST SHALL BE FIRST (2)

**A Sermon by Dean Scotty McLennan
University Public Worship
Stanford Memorial Church
September 24, 2006**

Jesus' disciples aren't looking very good in this week's gospel lesson.ⁱ And that's for the second week in a row. Last week's gospel selection in the common Christian lectionary was the immediately preceding passage in the ninth chapter of Mark. There the disciples were unable to cure an epileptic boy, and Jesus had to step to restore him to health. Here they have the arrogance to argue among themselves about who's the greatest: "I'm the best! No, I'm the best!" When Jesus catches them at it, they sheepishly fall silent, and then he explains that "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all." The last shall be first.

Jesus proceeds to show them what he means by taking a little child in his arms and saying "Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me, welcomes...the one who sent me."ⁱⁱ Obviously the disciples don't get it, for in the very next chapter of Mark people bring little children to Jesus and the disciples rebuke them. Jesus becomes indignant with them and says "Let the little children come to me; do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs."ⁱⁱⁱ

It's not easy for our modern ears to hear what radical statements Jesus is making about children. As college students just past childhood, as doting parents who put our children first, and as members of a youth-oriented society in general, we've exalted childhood as a privileged time of innocence, and we see children as having individual worth and dignity. Not so in biblical times. Then children were not even considered

people. They were property of their parents at best, and orphans were truly cast-offs and refuse. As Paul explained in his Letter to the Galatians, children are “no better than slaves.”^{iv} Therefore, to insist that receiving a child has value, in the adult society of Jesus’ disciples, is almost inconceivable. To suggest that the last in society come before them must have been totally flabbergasting to Jesus’ followers. They’d been arguing about who was the greatest among them – presumably about who was capable of eventually taking on the mantle of Jesus himself, having just been told that he would soon be betrayed and killed – and here’s Jesus saying that a little child is his stand-in or representative.^v

It’s been said that “there’s no smaller package in the world than that of a person all wrapped up in himself or herself.”^{vi} What’s going on for the disciples seems to be the first of the seven deadly sins: arrogance. Jesus hits them with a 2-by-4 in the middle of the head and tells them to become like little children if they want to enter the Kingdom of God. The last shall be first.

That first deadly sin is often described as “pride,” which can have a positive spin of self-respect, of refusal to give up or be humiliated, or of identification with a cherished group of people. However, translations of the Latin word for the deadly sin, *superbia*, by terms like hubris, vanity or arrogance, are more to the point.^{vii} We at an elite university like Stanford are particularly susceptible to this vice. It’s very hard for us to accept that the last shall be first and that it would be best if we would become like little children in our openness and acceptance of others, especially those without our intellectual and economic advantages. As my own college chaplain used to say: “The primary problems

of the planet arise not from the poor, for whom education is the answer; they arise from the well-educated, for whom self-interest is the problem.”^{viii}

Leo Tolstoy was a particularly astute observer of self-interest and arrogance, and many of his books and short stories concluded with the last becoming first. A favorite of mine, which I’ve taught many times and spoken of before from this pulpit, is *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*. The main character is a well-educated, wealthy lawyer in nineteenth century Russia. He dies at the age of 45 of a terminal illness, which developed a year and a half before. As he faces death, he’s able to take a long, hard look at himself in relation to his professional colleagues, his friends, his wife and children, and his servants.

Ivan Ilyich is by no means a bad person; in fact, he’s an ethical lawyer, a good citizen, an enjoyable friend, an excellent provider for his family, and a fair and loyal employer of his household staff. He’s widely known to be “capable, cheerful, good natured, and sociable.”^{ix} But here’s some of his shadow side: Tolstoy’s narrator says that Ivan was “drawn to people of high standing in society as a moth is to light; he had adopted their manners and their views on life.”^x As a magistrate, he “never abused his power” – in fact, “he tried to exercise it leniently, but the awareness of that power and the opportunity to be lenient constituted the chief interest and appeal of his...post.”^{xi} Along with his wife, he made sure to “move in the best social circles and their home was frequented by people of importance...they were equally adept at brushing off and escaping from various shabby friends and relations.”^{xii}

When he became sick, though, Ivan began finding some mirrors to reflect his prideful arrogance. He consulted with a celebrated physician, who had an “exaggerated air of importance (so familiar to him since it was the very air he assumed in court).”^{xiii} His wife

and daughter were so “caught up in a whirl of social activities” that they “had no understanding of what was happening” in terms of his need to be ministered to in his illness.^{xiv} His friends “began teasing him, in a friendly way, about his nervous fears,” and his professional colleagues began “eyeing him closely as a man whose post would soon be vacant.”^{xv}

The bottom line was that although most of this behavior reminded him of how he used to think and act, he now felt that there wasn’t “a single person to understand and pity him.”^{xvi} What began to torment him the most was “that no one gave him the kind of compassion he craved.” This well-educated, accomplished lawyer and socialite now simply “wanted to be caressed, kissed, [and] cried over, as sick children are caressed and comforted.”^{xvii} Yet, he had built the kind of life for himself where there was no one around to do so.

Except for one of his servants – a pantry boy named Gerasim. Along with bringing him food and taking out his chamber pots, Gerasim would lift up and hold Ivan’s legs, sometimes long into the night, which made Ivan feel much better. And he would do “everything easily, willingly, simply, and with a goodness of heart that moved Ivan.”^{xviii} As Ivan apologized for his condition and his needs, Gerasim smiled broadly and said, “Why shouldn’t I help you? You’re a sick man.”^{xix} Ivan came to feel comfortable only with Gerasim, as the only one who understood his situation and pitied him.^{xx} Gerasim was also honest with Ivan. As he once said, “We all have to die someday, so why shouldn’t I help you?” The narrator explains that by this Gerasim “meant that he did not find his work a burden because he was doing it for a dying man, and he hoped that someone would do the same for him when his time came.”^{xxi} And

Gerasim was basically still a child, as we're told, with a "fresh, good-natured, simple, young face, which was showing the first signs of a beard."^{xxii}

So, Ivan's arrogance is tamed only at the end of his life through a servant child. "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all."^{xxiii} Tolstoy knows he's telling a Christian story. Fifty-seven when *The Death of Ivan Ilyich* was published, Tolstoy in his fifties had reaffirmed his own Christianity and was trying concretely to live according to the prescriptions of Jesus. He was working on renouncing his aristocratic origins in order to live simply and honestly like Gerasim.^{xxiv} Jesus' message, of course, is inherently anti-elitist, and a challenge to all of us with worldly privilege: "Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me...Whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it."^{xxv} Jesus meant to found a church where people of all classes unite as equals. He meant to encourage people to rise in every land to break the captive's bond. For as it's been said, in conclusion, "You can't be proud and Christian both... How God must despise the spectacle of Christians who climb upon the cross to be seen from afar, thereby trampling on the one who has hung there so long."^{xxvi}

NOTES

ⁱ Mark 9: 30-37.

ⁱⁱ Mark 9: 37.

ⁱⁱⁱ Mark 10: 14.

^{iv} Galatians 4: 1.

^v *The New Interpreter's Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995), vol. VIII, pp. 637-638

^{vi} William Sloane Coffin, *Credo* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004), p. 24.

^{vii} "Pride," in *Wikipedia*, <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/arrogance>

^{viii} *Ibid.*, p. 61.

^{ix} Leo Tolstoy, *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*, translated by Lynn Solotaroff (New York: Bantam Book, 1987), p. 50.

^x *Ibid.*

^{xi} *Ibid.*, p. 53. (See also pp. 59-60).

^{xii} *Ibid.*, p. 71.

^{xiii} *Ibid.*, pp. 74-75.

^{xiv} *Ibid.*, p. 80.

^{xv} *Ibid.*, p. 81.

^{xvi} *Ibid.*, p. 83.

^{xvii} *Ibid.*, p. 104.

^{xviii} *Ibid.*, p. 102.

^{xix} *Ibid.*, p. 100.

^{xx} *Ibid.*, p. 103.

^{xxi} *Ibid.*, p. 104.

^{xxii} *Ibid.*, p. 100.

^{xxiii} Mark 9: 35.

^{xxiv} Ronald Blythe, "Introduction" to Leo Tolstoy, *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*, translated by Lynn Solotaroff (New York: Bantam Book, 1987), p. 17.

^{xxv} Mark 9:37; 10:15

^{xxvi} Coffin, *Credo*, p. 151.