

19 September 2021

Dear Friends of Elmwood,

I was flipping through an old notebook this week and came across a yellowed news article I'd stashed between its pages many years ago. It was about a Canadian artist, Timothy Schmalz, who'd made a life size statue of Jesus.

He has since been commissioned to make copies of this statue, each one cast in bronze. It has been discreetly installed in many public places in Europe and North America, often outside Churches.

I say 'discreetly' because you might walk by this statue and not notice it at all. If you do, you might not realise it's a statue. And if you *do* realise it's a statue, you might not realise it's a statue of Jesus.

But if you were to stop and gaze closely at its naked feet, you'd see the sculpted image of wounds made by nails. And if you know the story of Jesus and his death on a cross (you can't assume that everyone does) that's when the penny might drop.

Rage and Resentment Rule

When we think of a statue, we picture a person of great stature, standing upright, in a uniform or formal dress of some kind. Often, they're set upon a plinth. They're placed high above us so that we must look up to them.

That kind of statue is out of fashion now, isn't it?

I think that's partly because there's a growing resentment that we should ever be made to look up to anyone at all – except sports stars and celebrities, maybe, at least until they say something 'politically incorrect'. Then we feel we have the right to excoriate and 'cancel' them. (Who gave us this right?)

The images of our morally fallible predecessors, though preserved in stiff bronze or rigid marble, and perched on high pedestals, are soft targets indeed, especially when they're dead politicians. They can no longer speak for themselves, yet "their works do follow them." Sometimes, they did dreadful things. Who hasn't?

Who has anything good to say about politicians? If asked for an endorsement for Pontius Pilate, Jesus himself might have said, "Hmm...I'll have to get back to you on that."

Maybe this is why it's all the rage now – and I do mean *rage* – to deface, damage, and tear statues down, the way the people of Iraq pulled down that hulking statue of Saddam Hussein after he'd fled into hiding.

But rage, on its own, is not morally discerning, is it? That's why, in its extreme form, we call it *blind* rage. In neurological terms, it's all brain stem and no frontal lobe. Have you noticed, as I have, that secular social justice warriors sometimes mimic the very 'hatred' that they decry, and are not above using the same jackboot tactics they call 'fascist'? It's a well-worn truism that the extreme right and the extreme left mimic each other.

Perhaps their causes are 'right'. Sometimes. Maybe. Or not. That's not my point. My point is that they seem to have no feel for mercy, no vocabulary of forgiveness, no belief in redemption, and no understanding, no love, and certainly no *esteem* for that infinite grace who transcends us all – i.e., 'God', whom the world knocked from the pedestal long ago. ("God is dead. And we have killed him," wrote Friedrich Nietzsche.)

"No justice, no peace," they shout. That's *true*. But no mercy, no peace, either. Where will mercy be found if "God is dead"?

I can't imagine them saying, as Jesus did to the crowd of men who were about to stone a woman arrested for adultery, "Are you telling me *you* have no sin? Really? You're *really* that sure of yourself, are you? Alright then, why don't you cast the first stone?" (I paraphrase, of course. See St John 8: 1-11).

But I'm afraid some of them *would* cast that stone today. And then they'd pick one up to throw at Jesus, too, for siding with 'evil' and 'perpetuating injustice'. And then they'd 'cancel' him by crucifying him. Which is, after all, what happened.

Homeless Jesus

But that's what makes the statue of Jesus made by Timothy Schmalz so interesting – to me, at least.

There is no plinth or pedestal. There's only a park bench, cast in bronze, and a bronze image of Jesus lying upon it, wrapped in a blanket, as so many homeless people are in our city. Only his bare, wounded feet protrude.

One of these statues can be found outside Regis College at the University of Toronto. It's a Jesuit College, a Catholic Institution. Although religious symbols can be the targets of censors now (some Catholic Churches were burned by arsonists in Canada this summer), this statue has so far been allowed to stay.

Sometimes people think it's 'real'. They approach Jesus, believing it's a 'real person' asleep on the bench. Rather beautifully, they want to see if he's alright, if he needs anything.

Sometimes, too, the police are called. "I'd like to report a dead body." Or they're asked to wake him up and "move him along."

Even when the mistake is cleared up, reactions to this statue can be mixed. One of them sits in front of an Anglican Church. A woman passing by in her car saw it and phoned the police to report that a vagrant was sleeping there. She wasn't charmed to learn that it was a statue of Jesus.

"Jesus is not a vagrant. Jesus is not a helpless person who needs our help," she told reporters.

"I'm not so sure you're right about that," said the priest in charge of that Church. And he quoted from St Matthew: "Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head." Then there's this: "I was hungry, and you gave me food. I was a stranger and you welcomed me."

The statue of a homeless Jesus conflicted, in her mind, with the kind of statue we usually associate with Jesus – a victorious, upright, and strong Jesus, like the one that looms over Rio De Janeiro.

Both kinds are 'true', of course. And both must 'speak' to each other, through our own thinking and speaking and doing. They ought not to retreat to their opposite corners and shout condemnation at each other.

There's a similar statue by Schmalz. It depicts Jesus as a panhandler. It sits outside St Andrew's Church in Ottawa, right across the street from the Supreme Court. I like to think of it as a silent witness to our perennial need for justice. Jesus begs us not only justice in our courts, but for justice in our society. Yet it must be a justice infused by mercy. *Divine* justice, in other words.

I think these statues of a 'homeless Jesus' and a 'begging Jesus' revive something that's been missing from affluent, 'success-oriented' visions of Christianity.

Schmalz himself has said so: "I think that a homeless person, a marginalised person, can feel very disconnected from a Jesus that's represented as Mr Perfect and 'everything's fine'."

I think he's right.

Yours in the faith,
Andrew

“Homeless Jesus”



“Begging Jesus”



Christ the Redeemer, Rio de Janeiro

