

The Scandal of an Ordinary Carpenter from Nazareth

Why the Incarnation Overturns Human Ideas of Greatness

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John 1:14

Mark 6:3

Philippians 2:6-9

There is something profoundly unsettling about the way God came into the world. Had man been entrusted with the story of the Messiah, he would surely have surrounded His coming with all that the world recognises as greatness — power, splendour, influence and unquestioned authority. But "the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us" (John 1:14), and He came by another road. He was born where there was no room for Him, laid in a manger, and raised in Nazareth — a place from which men could ask, "Can there any good thing come out of Nazareth?" (John 1:46). And then came the almost casual question: "Is not this the carpenter?" (Mark 6:3). Yet hidden within that ordinary description was a mystery beyond all human reckoning. The hands that knew the grain of wood and the weight of a tool were the hands through which "all things were made" (John 1:3). The Creator had entered His creation, not demanding to be recognised, but accepting the limitations and obscurity of human life.

Perhaps, however, this was always the way of God. When Samuel stood before the sons of Jesse, he looked for the appearance of a king; but the Lord reminded him that "man looketh on the outward appearance, but the LORD looketh on the heart" (1 Samuel 16:7). David was called from among the sheep. Gideon came from a family he himself considered poor, and saw himself as the least in his father's house (Judges 6:15). Again and again, God moved through those whom men had not thought worthy of notice. Yet in Christ this pattern reaches beyond divine choice and enters into the very being of God revealed among us. "Being in the form of God," He "made himself of no reputation, and took upon him the form of a servant" (Philippians 2:6–7). He did not merely visit the lowly; He came among them. He did not merely bless ordinary human life from above; He entered it. For nearly thirty years, the eternal Son was content to live where history saw little worth recording. The silence of Nazareth is itself part of the revelation.

That silence speaks searchingly to us. We live in a world that fears obscurity and measures significance by what is seen. Even our service to God can sometimes become entangled with the desire to be noticed, appreciated and remembered. Yet before the crowds gathered, before the blind received their sight, before the dead were raised and before the name of Jesus was proclaimed across the land, there was Nazareth. There was the hidden life. There was daily labour. There was obedience in places where no one seemed to be watching. "And Jesus increased in wisdom and stature, and in favour with God and man" (Luke 2:52). The years were not wasted because they were hidden. God's work was not suspended because the world had not yet recognised Him. Perhaps one of the great errors of our spiritual lives is to imagine that only the visible part of our obedience matters. Nazareth tells us otherwise. God is at work even when no one is watching.

And then, when the Carpenter left Nazareth, the same scandal continued until it reached its darkest and most glorious expression at Calvary. The One who had entered the world in humility went on to embrace humiliation. He who "made himself of no reputation" was "obedient unto death, even the death of the cross" (Philippians 2:8). The hands that had fashioned wood in Nazareth were finally stretched out upon wood outside Jerusalem. There, human ideas of greatness were not merely challenged; they were brought to judgement. The world sees power in the ability to preserve oneself, but Christ revealed power in giving Himself. The world seeks the highest place, but He "humbled himself". And therein lies the scandal and the glory of the incarnation: God did not come to impress the world with greatness as the world understands it. He revealed that greatness is love which stoops, serves, gives and finally pours itself out. Thus the Carpenter of Nazareth still stands before all our ambitions, our desire for recognition and our fear of obscurity. He asks us to look again at what we call greatness. For in the end, the world looked upon a crucified man and saw defeat; but heaven saw the Lamb upon His throne. "Wherefore God also hath highly exalted him" (Philippians 2:9). The road from the manger to the Cross was not a departure from glory. It was glory revealed in a form the world could not recognise.