

## VEAL REDUCTION – PALM SUNDAY, 2008

We were at a really nice restaurant recently and the guy was giving us the specials and he just really touched such a powerful allergy I have to hyper inflated language. He started talking about a veal reduction. By the way, the title of this sermon is “Veal Reduction”. And I thought to myself, what in the world is a veal reduction. I’ve heard these words in other such restaurants but I finally turned to Mary and said, “Give me a break” and she said, “Well, when you sauté certain kinds of food and you kind of concentrate them and you get what they call a veal reduction.” Well, this is the kind of language that is just utter and complete baloney. It is just a way of sautéing food. And then he said, “Now I am going to interest you in a starter consisting of potato soup that has been drizzled in truffle oil.” Drizzled in truffle oil. And I said to Mary “Does he mean saturated, does he mean mixed with, why drizzled?” Because later on you are going to find out that Palm Sunday is drizzled in irony. So we had veal reduction and drizzled in truffle oil. And, by the way, anytime you go to a restaurant where they serve fennel, run the opposite direction. That is, run to the first McDonald’s you can possibly see. Then when it came time to order the wine, he talked about something called a wine flight. That is some kind of a Montgomery county Chardonnay called a wine flight. Then he gave us the menu and, well, I mean, this is normal, you go to these restaurants and you get this sort of fatuous over-inflated language that just reminded me, you know, that this is so pompous, such an over-inflation of language. I used to find this in the seventies. They used to say “have a nice day” , and then in the eighties, it became something different. It was “Have a great day”. And then in the nineties, what was it in the nineties? “Have an awesome day.”

Well, this is why we have recessions. Do you understand this is why we have recessions? Because everything is inflated with a kind of manic need to affirm the living daylights of everybody else and including fennel. Over-inflation: I was on the subway and I asked the guy who really knows about it. I said “What’s causing this apparent recession or whatever the right word is, explain the subprime thing which I don’t understand at all”. And he said, “ Well, first, the ground on which the houses were built was hopelessly overpriced by the developer. Then the house that was built was a \$40,000 house and they charged \$200,000 for it. So it would become a slum in five years no matter what happens. And then they promised, this ARM, they promised a mortgage that isn’t actually true. It can’t sustain the purchase so it has to be changed and heightened dramatically after five years or whatever it is. It’s this over-valuation of life. Now I talk about “ have an awesome day”, I talk about over-inflation, I talk about fennel. I talk about “veal reduction” which is the title of the sermon, and what we find on Palm Sunday is something that is actually sublime because Jesus’ first primary move, if you want to say his action, his profound action of riding down the Mount of Olives through the great gates on an ass, on the colt and foal of an ass. This was a profound implied rejection of over-inflation. Because the people of the time, as you know, were expecting a military solution to their problems of being victimized by the Romans. What He was doing is He was showing that an inflated view of life is profoundly not true to real life. And he is going to show you what real life is about by coming down on a donkey, by looking at the temple, and saying, “Behold, there is not one beautiful marble stone which you see which will not be toppled down.” And then He

said things like “The last will be first and the first will be last” and then he washed his disciples’ feet and said, “This is what a servant is and I am among you as one who serves.” He really criticized by implication the over-inflation of life.

And you know that this is the message that the New Testament brings. And it is a very shattering kind of a message. First, it says that professional success is a dream, professional success is an enigmatic dream, which is never lasting. It is something that we look for like the Thomas Cole painting of “Youth” in the National Gallery and it’s a castle in the sky and it comes tumbling down with any experience, hopefully sooner rather than later. And we discover that these huge relationships that we put all our hope in – our children – you know, we put all our investment into our children and then come to find out that they leave, or they go a different path, or they have a terrible, terrible problem in their lives which we take on and we discover that everything was inflated. We had an inflated view of our children’s importance to us, or an inflated view of our career, or an inflated view of our marriage. Anyone here who has been divorced knows that you didn’t decide to get divorced. You didn’t wake up in the morning and say, “I’m going to be impossible or unfaithful “. Your views of what it was supposed to be collapsed and so Jesus Christ, when he describes the human situation as one which is not inflated but consists of a king who comes to us on the foal of an ass, as Zechariah had prophesied. This is what it is about. It is a criticism of fennel. It’s a criticism of this kind of insubstantial inflated language which has nothing to do with reality. I could have said that we are going to go into a recession and anyone knows it on the sheer basis of American slang, we are promising what we cannot deliver.

Now, someone I admire, a Roman Catholic priest in the far west , says this: “Paul, your message, (that is the message of Jesus Christ which this man shares) “is inherently unmarketable. This is an inherently unmarketable message.” He wrote, “How do you make attractive that which is not attractive? How do you sell ‘non-success’? How do you talk Easter when everything in our world is about ascent? How do you present Jesus to a Promethean mind? This is not going to work”.

You see, we might as well stop right here. This message is not going to work. It is a message of great penetration retrospectively but, if you think people in the world are going to accept it, they are not. And this resulted in what we know has resulted and on Good Friday. Remember, not a single person voted for Jesus. When they had the moment of truth – you know on Good Friday – How many of you are voting for Barrabas? What was the percentage? 100% of the spectators voted in favor of Barrabas. The very same people who had rather conflictively and confusedly said “Hosanna in the Highest. Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord”. So, point one for a two-point sermon, the second point following directly from the first, is that we really need to take Jesus’ actions as the debunking of inflativeness. And everything around us is inflated. Cars are inflated. Everything we turn to is inflated. And that is the first point. And yet, His answer to inflation, what’s interesting in Christianity, His answer to inflation is not to reduce inflation to reality. Wouldn’t you think that would be the answer? Get a fair price for the lamb! Sell a house for its proper value and everything will be okay. That’s not really what

it was. Jesus actually believed in deflation. This is what distinguishes Christianity from other views of life. He believed that the answer to the human dilemma of inflatedness and hopelessly misplaced hope is deflation. It's not just fairness. It is actually descent. And going into the heart of the true problems of life. Now, when I say this, people say "you know you're hexing, I mean I'm trying my best here. I've got difficult children, a difficult job, a difficult wife, difficult financial commitments, and I'm just trying to do the best I can."

And I say, "Well, yes, I know that. I can't give it to you. But, looking back, you'll see that God came in through deflation. He didn't come through some form of arbitrary control. Now, I used to look back, before I had my first nervous breakdown in my late twenties, before I had my first and complete nervous breakdown, I said to myself, "life is basically on an upward progression" but, you know, I wasn't really telling the truth. I forgot to remember what happened – this is just me – I applied for a Rhode Scholarship and I came within a hair's breadth of getting it, and some total nerd from the Annapolis got it. But, anyway, from New York, it's a regional thing, and because he was a jock and I was only a jock by profession rather than by reality. I made huge misplaced statements about my ability at lacrosse, but the point is, you know, I hadn't even remembered in my late twenties that, in my late teens, I'd had what was for me a crushing defeat losing that particular honor. I thought that was what would happen and it didn't happen. But I neglected to remember it. And the interesting thing is this message is in fact not foreign to you. You can be twenty and, if you see your life has it has been, you all know this, that this deflation is where God enters. Well, I want to really sing the praises of:

First – dismantling inflated ideas of your life – and I think life does that anyway. But I want also to magnify the power of deflation because it really is true that God comes through the back door. That is not sort of a constrained or artificial construction or a false paradigm. Looking back, where God has worked has characteristically been in breast cancer, and in prostate cancer, and in a failed relationship, and in the Rhodes Scholarships that were the road never traveled and whatever it is. And that's what Jesus really said. He said "I've come among you as one who serves and my job is with smelly feet. I am here to show you that the whole thing consists of a moment in time when I shall say, "My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?"

Now I am going to close with an illustration of an author I think so highly of. You can't read him because none of his books are in print. You have to get it on Ebay. But Mark Rutherford wrote powerful novels in the late nineteenth century. And in his novel, Catherine Furr, he has an evangelical clergyman, a tremendous man who preaches wonderful sermons and is very successful in his work and is a tremendously attractive human being in every way with one exception. He doesn't know himself at all. He's like a lot of us. He has a lot of gifts and a lot of weaknesses and a lot of talents and a lot of deficits. But a lot of people don't know themselves at all. They need a bath in Palm Sunday. They need a bath on Good Friday. Something happens to this man. Let's simply call it a repeating defect of character that scuttles his entire life and ministry. This very powerful book, about an Anglican clergyman who is an

evangelical who has a remarkable turning, ends on the following note. And this is the Palm Sunday picture of humanity and life and, I believe, your life. And this is how it goes: His name is Mr. Cardue and he is the rector of his church.

“Mr. Cardue resigned his living and did not preach for many years. When pressed for an explanation, he generally gave his health as an excuse. Later in life, however, he took up his ministry again in a far distant purely agricultural parish and his sermons were now the simplest kind – exhortations to pity, consideration, gentleness, and counsel as to the common duties of his life. He spent much of his time visiting his parishioners and helping them in their difficulties. His wife, Mrs. Cardue, died before him but no woman ever had a husband more tender and devoted than hers in his later years. He had changed much and she knew it. But she did not know exactly how nor did she know the reason. We, the reader, know the reason. This is not the kind of change, she concludes, that comes from a new theory, or a new principal. It is something deeper.

Now the power of Jesus’ initial destructuring of inflated claims of power and success and its corresponding deflation can make the characteristic human condition as one of weakness and humility and beleagueredness and paralysis and major league WHAT? That is how we define the nature of the good and he did it by coming on a donkey. And He’s come to you that way. This is great hope. It’s not prospective. It’s retrospective. Look at yourself. It is those experiences into which Jesus Christ has ridden on a donkey, under it all has been love. The result has been a little bit of compassion. And the result has been a new birth, a prescription for your own experience of living. People have seen it in you. And this is where it has come from.

Thank you, dear God, for giving us a picture of life which lifts us out of the hole and brings us to love and hope in all that happens, for the sake of Jesus Christ, our Savior, Amen.