

## Wisdom at the Edges of Our World

by Laurence Steven

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Our scripture readings for today complement each other, illustrating how our growing with God is a matter of discovering and uncovering the wisdom and truth that hovers at the edges of our world.

Psalm 146 tells us not to put our trust in princes, in mortal beings who will die, taking their plans with them. Rather we need to trust in God “who made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them; who keeps faith forever”. That image of the all-powerful God is well-known to us, but is distant, mysterious, awesome. Such a view of God is hard for we simple mortals to connect with. But then the image of God in the psalm changes, doesn't it? From distanced and mysterious, God becomes a tangible actor in our world, a God who executes justice for the oppressed; who gives food to the hungry; who sets the prisoners free; who opens the eyes of the blind; who lifts up those who are bowed down; who loves the righteous; who watches over the strangers; who upholds the orphan and the widow.

It is easy to understand how such a perception of God, both as creator of the universe and bringer of justice to the oppressed, expresses the Jewish faith in a Messiah who will come in power to save the people of Israel and usher in a reign of peace and justice.

Yet when Jesus comes, he does not come in power to defeat the overlords of the Jews and restore the Jewish people to power. He repeatedly stresses that his kingdom is not of this world, not of the world that mortal human power makes. In his concern and compassion for the sick, poor, and downtrodden, though, he does incarnate the God of justice and mercy. He embodies that love, as an actor in the world, *like us*. In fact, Jesus's very life in the world, our world, is a sign to us of how we must live if justice and compassion are to flourish, if our world is to become God's kingdom.

Our second reading is the Mark passage presenting the scribe who questions Jesus about the most important commandment. I want to set the scene and provide some gospel context. The scene takes place in the temple in the heart of Jerusalem in the middle of Passover Week, what we know as Holy Week. The place is both the centre of Jewish faith and the centre of the Jewish world. Yet in the synoptic gospels of Mark, Matthew, and Luke Jesus berates the hypocrisy of Pharisees,

Scribes, teachers of the law, Sadducees, and Chief Priests. These faith leaders have lost track of their centre in God. They have built a temple like a fortress, and caught up in ritual sacrifices and offerings or in applying the finest details of the law, they are not tending to the manifest needs of their neighbours. And Jesus comes into the heart of their world and tells them so. They fear this vagabond from the boonies of Galilee, a possible prophet, sensing a threat to their power. They repeatedly test Jesus, trying to trap him so they can accuse him of blasphemy or heresy, of breaking Jewish law, and so arrest him.

Yet in his exchange with Jesus the scribe discovers his understanding of faith extended. This scene has parallel versions in Matthew and Luke, but there the scribe is referred to as a Pharisee who is testing Jesus. In Mark the scribe is not testing, but seems genuinely curious. He sees that Jesus has answered his fellow legal experts well, and so takes the opportunity to ask a crucial question of him:

"Which commandment is the first of all?"

12:29 Jesus answered, "The first is, 'Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one;

12:30 you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.'

12:31 The second is this, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no other commandment greater than these."

The scribe agrees, saying "You are right, Teacher". He repeats what Jesus has said, and then adds something which should shake the foundations of the temple in which they stand: "this is much more important than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices." And Jesus says something not said in the parallel versions: "You are not far from the kingdom of God." The wisdom from the edge of the scribe's world is now rocking its centre.

In the gospel of John we learn of the encounter between Jesus and the Pharisee Nicodemus. He doesn't appear in the other gospels. Yet his story is instructive. Even more clearly than the scribe just mentioned, Nicodemus is genuinely interested in Jesus's message. Fearful of being seen by his fellows, he comes to Jesus at night. Jesus tells him about the need to be born again, or "from above." In response to Nicodemus's puzzled request for clarity Jesus speaks of the Spirit as a wind blowing "wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit." Nicodemus is still puzzled, not seeing that Jesus's life on earth, his hither-

and-yon, vagabond journeying just is the movement of the Holy Spirit through the land. Jesus changes the metaphor:

Light has come into the world, but people loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil. <sup>20</sup> Everyone who does evil hates the light, and will not come into the light for fear that their deeds will be exposed. <sup>21</sup> But whoever lives by the truth comes into the light, so that it may be seen plainly that what they have done has been done in the sight of God.

This formulation must have touched Nicodemus at his core, because the next time we meet him is at a meeting of the Sanhedrin, the Jewish ruling Council, who is planning to arrest Jesus. Here, in the light of day, Nicodemus challenges his peers:

John 7: 50-52 <sup>50</sup> Nicodemus, who had gone to Jesus before, and who was one of them, asked, <sup>51</sup> “Our law does not judge people without first giving them a hearing to find out what they are doing, does it?” <sup>52</sup> They replied, “Surely you are not also from Galilee, are you? Search and you will see that no prophet is to arise from Galilee.”

The Council pooh-poohs Nicodemus’s advice, in fact mocking him with being a hick from the Galilean countryside. Nicodemus, though, is living by his newly emerging truth, the light that has come into the world. The mocking Council, though, is a perfect illustration of that wonderful King James version passage from Job 38: 2--“Who is this who darkens counsel / By words without knowledge?”

When our counsellors, those in power, darken their counsel by ignorance—not doing due diligence—or by outright lying for their own interests, they are darkening our world, closing out the light of God’s world. Yet there is always wisdom at the edges of this darkened world; there are always cracks letting the light in; there are always voices echoing Jesus, speaking truth to power, as we are called to do.

To help us see how that goes on and is going on in our world in Ontario today, I’m going to call on my wife Jan for an instructive story I’m sure you’ll enjoy:

**How many people here know who Charlie Angus is? I’ll give you a hint. Angus has been the federal Member of Parliament for the riding of Timmins-James Bay since winning the 2004 election.**

**But Laur and I knew Charlie Angus before he was Charlie Angus. We knew him when he was the lead singer of the band Grievous Angels and when he and**

his wife Brit Griffin ran the very radical *HighGrader* magazine from Cobalt Ontario. And they were penniless and had three sweet girls to raise.

I'm not sure how we met Charlie but I think it was because Laur and I had an arts and culture radio show through Laurentian University – CKLU – every Thursday morning from 1997 to 1998. We played his music. We subscribed to *HighGrader* magazine and received extra copies to distribute.

And we stayed in the arts scene in a variety of ways – and continued to promote Grievous Angels and *HighGrader* magazine.

It was around 1999 that we started attending Waters Mennonite Church. We loved Waters instantly and very quickly invited the pastor – Dave Nicol – and his wife Erma over to dinner to chat about becoming members. (And just in case anyone is wondering, Erma was formerly Erma Martin, sister of David Martin, recent head of MCEC, and cousin of our own Dave Brubacher.)

Great. The date was set ... but then our friend Charlie Angus asked if he could couch-surf at our place on his way home to Cobalt after a gig in Sault Ste. Marie, at the same time the Nicols were coming over.

I truly could have died. I felt “the gig was up” because the Nicols were not inclined to swear and rant and rave about social justice and drink alcohol. And our friend Charlie – well, he was part of our hidden life.

I could not have predicted what happened next. Charlie arrived and the Nichols were there and – who would have guessed – they were both part of missions in Toronto at the same time, and within a block of the same place.

They got along like peas and carrots. For sure Charlie was Charlie—he can't be other—but when he was pouring a big scotch and wondering “what the [blankety-blank] am I doing”, he was talking about leading a choir for wild youth at the Catholic church in Cobalt. And his tough-as-nails wife Brit was leading a Bible study for them.

We became members at Waters; Charlie became MP for Timmins-James Bay. And I realized I was being like Nicodemus—having certain things in the dark and certain things in the light. But didn't Jesus just show up in the midst of this—bringing both together—and furthering his Good News.

To close I want to zoom in briefly on two episodes in Charlie Angus's life that demonstrate his voice speaking truth to power, from a position on what our world would often call its edges, or hinterlands, or boonies, or even looney fringe. What they show is Charlie's commitment to the mission of Jesus in a world caught up in its own power and privilege, eerily like the Jewish leaders of Jesus's day.

Here is an excerpt from the bio on Charlie's website: "While growing up in Scarborough in the early 80s, Charlie and childhood friend Andrew Cash formed the punk rock band L'Étranger, holding music rallies to encourage others to get active in political change. At the age of 25, inspired by a biography on Dorothy Day, Charlie and his wife opened a Catholic Worker House for the homeless, refugees and men coming out of prison in downtown Toronto."

And here is Charlie Angus, from his book *Unlikely Radicals*, about the Kirkland Lake Adams Mine protest by the people of Northern Ontario against turning the gargantuan open pit mine into a dump for Toronto's garbage:

"I'm often asked the question, 'What got you into politics?'"

I always think back to a cold October night in 2000, when I stood on a makeshift barricade on the Adams Mine Road. Across the road, police were lining up for mass arrests. But the people who were holding the line weren't radicals, they were my neighbours - many of them senior citizens and farmers. Up until that moment, I had never considered a life in politics... as I stood on that barricade, I realized that the people who should have been there to protect the public interest had sold us out."

Like Charlie Angus, like Nicodemus, perhaps like the enlightened scribe, we have to ask ourselves which world we want to live in—the mortal world that produces and protects power and privilege, or God's kingdom that cares for the ones shunted to the edges by that mortal world. Our Mennonite community is showing the effects of choosing God's kingdom through groups such as Mennonite Central Committee, Christian Peacemaker Teams, and Mennonite Disaster Services. We here at Grace show the effects through our support for such things as the Bridge of Hope, Meserete Kristos Seminary, and the Westview Centre for Women. The wonderous irony is that as we pay attention to those edges of our world we discover a gift of wisdom and light that shines truth back into the mortal world, uncovering another way to live.

Amen