



Man grasping to be superman

In a wonderful and familiar passage of the New Testament we read that Christ *'thought it not robbery to be equal with God'* (Philippians 2:6). Translators and commentators help us to seize the precise meaning of this thought by suggesting that equality with God was not, for Christ, something 'to be grasped' or 'snatched at'. Our blessed Lord had equality with God and he never lost it. But he chose for our sakes to appear in this world in so humble a form that men supposed him not to be God.

Christ did not lay aside his godhood but by taking our nature into union with himself he exposed himself, while on earth, to profound misunderstanding on the part of others. In that way he did not make a full display, as he had every right to do, of the divine godhead which was his. During the days of our Saviour's life on earth he appeared, as it were, in disguise. A veil covered his infinite and eternal glory — a veil which was not lifted in his earthly life except once, during the Transfiguration.

It should not escape our notice that in so acting Christ behaved in a manner quite the reverse of others. The self-effacement of the Son of God is in complete contrast to the grasping spirit which was the undoing of so many myriads of fallen angels and men. They strove to be and to appear higher and mightier than their created order had made them. Fallen creatures all fell over the same ambitious desire to be 'as gods' or, to put it another way, 'as God' (Genesis 3:5).

This was the glittering prize which seduced our first parents and it is ominously similar to the aim and objective which had earlier ruined the Tempter:

'I will ascend into heaven, I will exalt my throne above the stars of God ... I will ascend above the heights of the clouds; I will be like the most High.'

(Isaiah 14:13-14)

Satan, like Adam after him and like all Adam's children more or less since, set his *'heart as the heart of God'* (Ezekiel 28:6). It should not confuse us that in the prophetic passages where these statements appear they refer to the Kings of Babylon and Tyrus. *Their* grasping pride was the same as Adam's and it was no different from that of Satan or *'Lucifer, son of the morning'* (Isaiah 14:12).

It must strike us on serious reflection to be a strange thing that the only two orders of rational beings, angels and men, have both had an inclination to become God. It was not that they were badly done by in the condition in which God made them. On the contrary, they had everything they needed to make them happy. Satan once shined as a bright angel in the firmament of heaven. And our first parents had a perfect paradise with full permission to enjoy it. Only one restriction was put by God on their freedom. But it was one they could not bear. They followed the pattern of fallen angels in grasping what was not theirs by right. This history is well-known. But we draw attention to the remarkable fact that one and the same fatal craving in angels and men led to the ruin of them both.

A philosopher might well find fertile soil for speculation in this curious circumstance to which we here refer. Is it in some way part of the mind of creatures to crave to be more than we are? Is it a case of the heart yearning to become what the eye sees? Is it the fascination which the created being has with the very idea of God? We do not pretend to know the answer to such questions. But the fact appears to be that there is in rational beings an appetite to become something bigger than we are. The evidence is in history and it is also right before our eyes in this proud world of ours where men aspire to be supermen.

It is a matter for profound thankfulness that the ambition of Satan to be God failed. It may do us no harm to imagine for a moment what life would be like if Satan could have succeeded. For the blessed God to be no longer Ruler of the universe is the ultimate nightmare. To have to pray to Satan for our daily bread, for help, guidance, mercy and heaven — O what unutterable slavery! To have to spend eternity worshipping Satan — O what sevenfold spiritual torment! To look to the Prince of evil for pity, grace and compassion — O what sublime disappointment! With unspeakable relief we return to the blessed thought that God alone rules the world. Our loving heavenly Father is the unrivalled Monarch of the skies. It is the greatest mercy in all existence!

Man's unbelief is his own worst enemy. The torture of mind which men bring on themselves by unbelief is as tragic as it is senseless. Once men cease to believe in God, as G. K. Chesterton well said, it is not that they believe in nothing but that they believe in anything. Our civilised, educated, sophisticated age bears witness to this. Instead of God and angels, children today have spacemen and supermen. Dinosaurs and other miserable reptiles, real and fictitious, now call forth a child's wonder and admiration, whereas once the Creator and his works, the Saviour and his miracles, held sway over young minds.

Well has the Apostle said: *'they changed the glory of the uncorruptible God into an image made like to ... creeping things'* (Romans 1:23). The results of all this atheism are to be seen in the numberless fears and superstitions that rack men's minds. When men pray to the creature and not to God they will find only an eyeless socket and not a gracious heavenly Father. It is the law of the moral universe that when men prefer not to fear God they will have to fear everything else.

The craving to be larger than life is something that we all feel at times. It is a temptation which besets us all our life. Man is such a poor, fallen, empty shadow of his once great original that he longs to inflate and enlarge himself into something more impressive than to be merely man. It was the folly of those kings and emperors of old who, like Nebuchadnezzar (Daniel 4) and Herod (Acts 12), aspired to be thought gods among men. It is the folly of many modern superstars and adulated sportsmen. The hand of sinners ever grasps for the shadow of greatness and importance.

The people of God must resist this carnal spirit. It is not of God but of the world. There should be no wish in a Christian, however gifted or important, to behave as if he were more than a mere man. This is one snare of the modern pulpit. It can so easily become a platform on which a preacher aims to strut with self-importance. Never was the danger of ministers grasping to become supermen greater, probably, than in the world of today, where electronics and amplification, spot-lights and video cameras make self-aggrandisement so much easier than ever before.

It is so easy to read the Epistles of Paul and not to notice how consciously scrupulous he is always to be thought nothing more than a man. Towering gifts and sublime revelations from God might so easily have led him to grasp at the image of the superman. But he mortified this lust in every part of his ministry and in every line of his writings. He refused to adopt the Olympian style of the false prophet and spoke rather as a real man to real men. This is seen very clearly in his Epistles.

When Paul writes to the Roman Christians he begins by telling them that he longed to be *'comforted together'* with them, as he says, *'by the mutual faith both of you and me'* (Romans 1:12). Seldom have such young Christians been so respectfully addressed by a visiting preacher of international renown! When he writes to the Corinthians he makes a very full display of his humanity. Not as a spiritual superman but emphatically as a genuine mortal, he tells them how he was with them at the first *'in weakness, and in fear, and in much trembling'* (1 Corinthians 2:3). So far is he from pretending to be larger than life that he declares: *'let no man glory in men'* (1 Corinthians 3:21). The apostles, he affirms, are not supermen but only *'stewards of the mysteries of God'* (1 Corinthians 4:1). The believer must learn *'not to think of men above that which is written, that no one of you'*, as he says, *'be puffed up for one against another'* (1 Corinthians 4:6).

So far was Paul from wanting to put the apostles on a pedestal that he could write:

'I think that God hath set forth us the apostles last, as it were appointed to death: for we are made a spectacle unto the world, and to angels, and to men.'

(1 Corinthians 4:9)

Not only so, but these same apostles, though the greatest ministers of all history, were in their day *'made as the filth of the world'* and as *'the offscouring of all things'* (1 Corinthians 4:13).

These expressions, and a score of others like them in Paul's Epistles, illustrate how determined he was to reject the image of the superstar and how insistent he was that none should have an exaggerated view of himself or the other apostles. What he exclaimed to the men of Lystra he virtually declared wherever he went: *'We also are men of like passions with you'* (Acts 14:15).

It would have been well if ministers who followed the apostles in after years had adopted the same humble style of thought and speech. As it was, in the following centuries the ministry gradually became a sacred order whose importance was bolstered by ever growing claims to the possession of almost magical powers. In the course of time the Protestant Reformation recalled people to the good old apostolic attitude to preachers, that they are to be honoured as ministers of the Word of God and nothing more. But the danger of church leaders' reaching to be larger than life is an ever-present one, as the twentieth-century itself still bears witness at times.

We do not wish to be misunderstood. Let every Christian and every preacher strive to the full to excel in every way. To be content with mediocrity when we might rise to a higher standard is a criminal wastage. Let every believer be the best he can with the gifts he has received. There is such a thing as excellence, and sometimes even superlative excellence. It is every believer's duty to be the best he can be and to do the most he can do for his great Master. To this end we need to stir up the gift of God within us, to attend to reading, praying and every other form of service to Jesus Christ. With such excellence no one can have any complaint.

The danger which we are here referring to is of using the gospel-ministry to become *'lords over God's heritage'* (1 Peter 5:3). Such is the level of ignorance in some Christian circles that the preacher is allowed to become a guru and his claims as a leader are received with unthinking servility.

It is to protect the flock from such demigods that the Scriptures teach us to *'try the spirits'* and to *'prove all things'* (1 John 4:1; 1 Thessalonians 5:21). When church leaders climb so close to heaven that they can claim to slay us in the Spirit, or fill us with the Spirit or make us drunk with the Spirit — and rumour has it that such super-ministers do exist — it is about time that Christian persons began to 'try' and to 'prove' these claims with a healthy scepticism. When preachers reach up to grasp for themselves the titles of 'prophet', 'priest' or 'apostle', it is surely high time for God's flock to study carefully the validity of their credentials. When scholars claim to be able to rewrite the church's historic creeds and confessions and to transmit God's message to man more accurately through the medium of their own brains, rather than through the pages of holy Scripture, it is surely time for Christian congregations to watch their step.

It is a sign of spiritual immaturity when we are over-impressed with those who are larger than life. A safe rule is this: 'Beware the superman'. The super-loud talker, the larger-than-large self-styled leader, the preacher who 'guarantees' results, the man who brings his pedestal with him when he comes to the fellowship — these and all such men ought to put us at once on our guard by their very great eminence and importance.

The Apostle Paul has some pertinent things to say about persons of this kind. He speaks of church leaders in his own day who *'commended themselves'* and who *'measured themselves by themselves and compared themselves among themselves'* (2 Corinthians 10:12). Evidently he had watched them and noticed their manner of operating in the churches. They *'stretched themselves beyond their measure'* and were not above *'boasting of ... other men's labours'* (2 Corinthians 12:14-15). He was forthright in the rebuke he gave to Christians who lusted after supermen-preachers: *'Ye suffer (it), if a man bring you into bondage, if a man devour you, if a man take of you, if a man exalt himself, if a man smite you on the face'* (2 Corinthians 11:20). Evidently Paul had a low opinion of supermen. He put it bluntly in these terms:

'(A minister must not be) a novice, lest being lifted up with pride he fall into the condemnation of the devil.'

(1 Timothy 3:6)

We said earlier that there is in rational beings the appetite to be something higher and better than we now are. That need not surprise us. This life was not meant by God to be our final condition. Adam's paradise was intended at best to be a picture to him of a higher and better paradise above where man's every aspiration and wish would be finally and eternally satisfied. God made us for himself and we shall be fully happy as men only when we see God and are, in Christ, made fully blessed with him. That day is close at hand for all God's dear children. Soon — very soon — all believers will come to the highest pinnacle of all their hopes and desires. In heaven we shall be raised, in Christ, to the most perfect status and condition which we could ever wish or desire.

Our Saviour's lowly example, however, reminds us that the true way to mount up is not to grasp for honours but to humble ourselves, as he did, to be nothing in this world. After all, *'the last shall be first, and the first last'* (Matthew 20:16).

Please, no more evangelical supermen.

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