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**February 24, 2008**

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### **“Bend the Knee”**

When the book *Sarum*, by Edward Rutherford, came out in the mid ‘80’s, I read it at my parents recommendation and enjoyed it very much. The book traces the history of the place and the people in one area of England, Salisbury Plain, from prehistory to the present. It’s a wonderful read, and, because I’m an Anglophile, a history buff, and a lover of big, thick, epic books, it was a great fit for me. In the years since, I’ve picked it up a few times again, and read the fictionalized accounts of the building of Stonehenge and the invasions of the Romans, then the Vikings, then the Normans. When I picked it up this winter, however, it just so happened that I had been thinking about worship quite a bit, so that when I read the passages about the construction of Salisbury Cathedral, I was struck by several things that I had not noticed before.

First, I was struck by the absolute acceptance by the people in the 13<sup>th</sup> century of the concept of Lordship. In feudal England, every living soul knew exactly what their place was in the society—for the most part, this was determined by your status and birth and there weren’t many opportunities to move from one strata of society to another. Villeins, or people who did not own land but lived on another’s land, owed their loyalty and several days a week of their labor to the one who owned the land. They also owed loyalty, labor, and military service to whatever earl or duke the king had placed over that area of the country. Landowners also owed fealty to these gentry, and in turn, the gentry owed loyalty (and taxes and military service) to their lord, the King. In theory, it was a system that the King and the gentry repaid with their protection, but for the most part, the wealthy and powerful abused both their wealth and their power and it was a one-sided bargain. Still, when it came to understanding their place in the universe, the people of that time had a very real and tangible concept of what it meant to serve a lord, and what it meant to bow to the superiority of one whose authority was beyond theirs.

Still more interesting than the overall makeup of the society was the description of the building of the cathedral itself. For its time—and really for any time—Salisbury Cathedral is a technological marvel. It was begun in 1220 and the spire was added between 1297 and 1320—making the building a 100 year project. It is built of two kinds of marble—one a more local marble Chilmark, the other, called Purbeck, is some of the hardest marble in the world. There are several elements of the technology of the structure which I find fascinating. One relatively new technology of the time was the arch.

Take a look at the pictures of medieval castles—the walls are several feet thick and have no windows, only slots in the walls for arrows to be shot through. But a cathedral is not made for defense. It is made to be the visible message of the nature of God. It needs to rise high into the sky, breaking into the heavens to point toward God. And the interior needs to have soaring ceilings and a great deal of light to accentuate the sense of awe and wonder at the presence of God. But it must still be able to hold up a tremendous amount of weight. And so, the introduction of the arch adds an incredible new dimension to these enormous buildings of stone. You see, with an arch, the stones press against each other and the weight is distributed evenly, carrying the weight at the top of the stones, through the archway and into the ground. So the architects could design a building with tremendous windows and high, vaulted ceilings, which were all supported by arches, and half-arches connected to the supporting pillars, which were called “buttresses” or “flying buttresses.”

The spire of Salisbury Cathedral is 404 feet high and, at its completion in 1320, was the highest point in England. The technology behind it is fascinating as well, because it is constructed of very narrow blocks of marble—only nine inches thick—which are held together by huge bands of iron,

welded to iron bars through the center of the spire to keep it from springing apart. The spire itself weighs over 6500 tons, and at its completion, caused the four enormous pillars of Purbeck marble to bend, so that they had to be further braced with interior arches. So while the building may appear to be a static pile of stones, actually it is a tremendous collection of pressures and tensions, all working on each other at the same time to keep all those stones that high up in the air.

All of these are facts, which Rutherford brings into the narrative of the story as he goes along. What holds the story together, though, are the stories of the people who live in each time period. During the period of the construction of the cathedral, Rutherford focuses on a mason named Osmund. Rutherford introduces Osmund as a teenager who is skilled with his hands and gains an apprenticeship to a mason working on the cathedral. In order to give the reader a panoramic view of the construction, Rutherford gives Osmund an unusually long life—80-some years in a time when most people were lucky to see 50. What is wonderful about the story of Osmund is not just that he gives his entire life to the building of the cathedral. And it's not just that he gives his great skill to the decoration and completion of the cathedral. It is that Osmund gives everything—all that he is, including his sins, to the cathedral.

Rutherford uses one of the common teachings of the church—which every person in that culture would have known by heart—to illuminate Osmund's life: the seven deadly sins. We see Osmund's anger, Osmund's jealousy, Osmund's gluttony—but it is Osmund's lust that almost destroys him. And when Osmund is brought low by his middle-aged lust for a girl half his own age who rejects him utterly, Osmund incorporates it into the cathedral. In a bas relief he is carving of Adam and Eve's expulsion from the Garden of Eden, Osmund gives Adam his own face and body, turning from Eden in shame, and gives to Eve the face of the young girl. Osmund's sin becomes a permanent addition to the great cathedral.

So let's go back now and look at that story of Jesus and the Samaritan woman. This is an odd conversation, isn't it? It's odd for a Jew to talk to a Samaritan, it's odd for a man to talk to a woman, and it's even more odd that, in the middle of the day at a well in Palestine, they're having this conversation about worship. But our Jesus, he's quite often in the middle of these odd kinds of conversation. "May I have a drink?" he says. She says, "Why are you asking me for a drink?" He says, "If you had any idea who I am, you'd ask ME for a drink and I'd give you living water." She says, "Oh, you must be greater than Jacob since you think you're going to get water without a bucket and a rope!" He says, "The water I've got is better than this water—you drink it, and you won't be thirsty any more." She says—some honesty creeping in here—"I'd like that water—then I wouldn't have to come back to this well all the time." He says, "Call your husband." She says—honest, but defiant, "I don't have a husband." And here, I'll bet you anything, Jesus laughs. "Ha! Bingo! As a matter of fact, you have had five husbands and you haven't bothered to marry the guy who is currently sharing your bed."

Now she's beginning to get some sense of who this must be—she says, "You're a prophet, aren't you? Well, you're not my prophet—my people worship on this mountain and you Jews worship in Jerusalem." She doesn't want to talk about her husbands—she's changing the subject. Jesus says, "All that's true—you worship what you don't understand. The Jews have some understanding and salvation comes through them. But neither of you has the whole picture. Soon, you will all worship the way you were intended to—in spirit and in truth. God is spirit, so those who would worship must worship God in spirit and in truth." She says, "When the Messiah comes, he'll explain all of this to us." Jesus says, "I am he."

If we take this passage and use it as a model for the order in which true worship of God happens, it looks like this:

1. God initiates the conversation—we are invited to come. This woman would not have spoken to Jesus—she specifically went to the well in the middle of the day so she wouldn't have to speak to anyone. So Jesus opens the door to the relationship.

2. We recognize God's Lordship over us. In this conversation, the woman is resentful and grudging in her recognition of Jesus' superior status, but recognize it she does. Not to recognize the lordship of a Jewish man over herself might have been not only foolish, but dangerous. Her question to Jesus is filled with her bad attitude, but is subservient nonetheless.

3. We submit ourselves to the dialogue between God's holiness and our sinfulness. Marva Dawn, who has written several excellent books about worship, calls this the "dialectical tension" between "how much we deserve God's wrath" and the great truth that "God instead deals with us in gracious love and invites us to respond in love" (*Reaching Out Without Dumbing Down*, 97).

4. We offer to God our whole selves, withholding nothing. Again, the woman at the well is not anxious to talk about her sins, but once she is able to acknowledge them, she begins to see who Jesus really is. And the deeper she allows herself to be drawn into that conversation, the deeper the revelation of Jesus as the Christ who can transform her life. Marva Dawn calls these "gifts between lovers," likening the feeling of giving our whole selves to God to the feeling that makes us want to leave gifts at the door of our beloved.

5. Revelation. God reveals himself to us and we are granted insight into God's nature. The woman at the well—a person who lived her life in an unrelenting sense of her own unworthiness—is given a singularly privileged revelation. She gets to stand in the presence of the Christ, having heard him say, from his own lips, that he is the one she has been waiting for all her life.

6. We go out and tell the good news. The first act of the woman after the revelation of Jesus is to run into town and tell everyone. She runs to see the people she has so assiduously avoided and tells them the great news of the Messiah, who told her truth about herself. And many believe and enter into relationship with the Christ.

Think, now, back to that cathedral. Think of the recognition, not just of the social strata, but of the lordship of God. The wonder at the awesome nature of God that is reflected in the size and nature of the structure. That reverence for the lordship of something over us does not come easily for Americans. Remember when Nancy Reagan went to see Queen Elizabeth? No matter how we felt about the Reagans, Americans as a whole approved of her refusal to bow to the Queen, while the British were absolutely appalled. Yeah, take that, Queen! We bow to no one! That's why we became Americans—so we wouldn't have to bow. But if we would worship, we must bow—we must bend the knee—we must respond to the call of God with, at the very least, the sense that we, the unholy, are entering into the presence of the only Being in the universe who is holy. Warren said something fairly wonderful this past Wednesday in his class—he said that he believes that when we sing, the Sanctus, "Holy, holy, holy," the angels in heaven say, "I know that song," and begin to sing with us. That is the mystery and the awe that ought to send us to our knees when we dare to enter into worship.

Think of the tension holding together that cathedral. Now you may think, "Tension? I don't come to church to feel tension—I get enough of that at work" or "I get enough of that from my children!" But without that tension, there is no cathedral. Without that pressure—the one stone pushing on the other, which pushes on another, which pushes the enormous weight into the ground—the building collapses. "Dialectical tension"—God is holy, we are not, God invites us anyway, we ask forgiveness, God forgives, we sing praises, we are granted true revelation.

Think of Osmund the mason, who left his blood and his sweat on the very stones of the cathedral. Think of how he carved both his skill and his sin into that bas relief, where both stand memorialized for everyone to see. That is what each of us must bring to worship—our whole selves. We don't enjoy acknowledging our sin. Oh, we might be perfectly willing to admit we're not perfect when it suits us, as an excuse. Caught in a mistake, a man might say, "I'm sorry. I'm not perfect." Caught in a similar mistake, a woman might say, "I'm sorry I'm not perfect," and you walk away thinking "How is it suddenly my fault that she's not perfect?" It's all very painful and embarrassing. But if we would worship we must come together honestly, each of us bearing her own offering, covered without our blood and sweat, constructed out of our very lives, and laying bear all those

faults—which, incidentally, everyone else knows about anyway. Together we build our cathedral, each bringing our own offering, one stone pressing on the other, our loves and our lives, our sins and our triumphs, rising into the sky to express our wonder that the God of the universe would have any interest in us at all.

Like all that is worthwhile in life, worship is not easy. But the great God of heaven is faithful and there is no one, no one who will walk away empty handed if he comes before God and bends the knee.