

“Tred Thou In Them Boldly”

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Text: Philippians 2: 1 - 13

Rev. Peter Coutts

Wenceslaus 1 became Duke of Bohemia in 925 AD at the age of 18. He had been raised a Christian in a land that was not. So he took his royal authority to promote Christianity by building churches and encouraging the Christian life. His generosity to the poor was a thing of legend. He was assassinated at the age of 28. But in that short life he was a model of Christian practice that is illustrated in a memorable tale that was turned into an English carol. “Good King Wenceslaus once looked out on the Feast of Stephen” (Dec. 26). He saw a poor man gathering winter fuel and decided to share a kindness with him. Now the carol lists many reasons for Wenceslaus not to help the man. It was nighttime, which in his day was not a safe time. It was cruelly cold with a wind so bitter that the Duke’s page thought he would perish. There was the distance of class distinction that would be a great divide between the ruler and the peasant. Wenceslaus did not even know the man. But in this tale Wenceslaus looked on this man’s situation with compassion. Here was an impoverished man, who apparently had to travel five kilometres from home to find firewood on a bitterly cold, windy night. So the Duke decided to give him food, wine and fuel for his home. He helped do this himself rather than simply order his page to carry out his wishes. The carol holds Wenceslaus up as a not-too-subtle Christ figure, making two points in this sermon song. First, the carol calls us to be generous to the poor, as was Christ. The second sermon point is made in seeing how the Duke helped the page to fulfil the Duke’s will: the Duke led the way, created a path through the deep snow, imparting warmth to his follower. Again, as a not-so-subtle Christ figure, the carol tells us that the Master helps the disciple to follow in his ways. Soon after the death of Wenceslaus he was designated a Saint.

Generosity is such a central element of Christmas for us. Everyone gets into the spirit: taking teddy bears to the Hitmen game, giving a donation to the foodbank, dropping a toonie in the Salvation Army kettle. We expect it of ourselves and feel good in the doing. It seems that our generosity is also increasing in our gift-giving to our loved ones. It is estimated that Canadian adults on average will spend \$620 on gifts, with husbands spending 25% more on wives than wives do for husbands! The TV ads are telling us that “bigger is better” and that we need to “wow” our loved ones. And our joy on Christmas morn in opening these gifts will be translated into joy for the credit card companies next month, leading many into a season of frugality. We all recognize Christmas as a season through which we wish to be generous. But how would the world look if January was as generous a month as December.... and February, March, April...? The example of Wenceslaus that is remembered was his generosity throughout the year.

My wife has a work colleague whose family did a remarkable thing. At the age of 40, she and her husband both quit their jobs and moved with their two daughters (age 10 and 7) to South Africa for six months. There they worked as short term Christian missionaries in a poor, rural area in the north-east end of the country. They were volunteers, and as such were not paid. Their main work was to help encourage young children to come off the street during the day and join pre-school programs. The programs were there to provide care and safety during the day while older siblings were at school or work, in an area that was really not that safe. The program was also intended to give these young children a good start at an education, in the hope that education in time would help them escape the bondage of poverty later in life. This family put their Calgary life on hold because of an urge to express Christian love. As you can imagine, the experience changed them. When they returned to Canada the woman was able to get her old job back. The man, however, could not go back to the business world he left. He is now doing community development work in this city with a non-profit organization. A family of Christians being generous with the time of their life in an expression of Christian love.

Many of you will have heard of the Christian Corrie Ten Boom. In the Netherlands during the Second World War the Ten Boom family harboured Jews in their home to prevent their arrest by the Nazi's. In 1943 and 1944 they typically had six or seven in their hiding place. Sadly the family was betrayed. Connie, as well as her father, sister and cousin, were sent to a detention camp. Of the four family members only Connie survived. Connie herself suffered greatly and was abused by the guards. After the war one particular guard who had been especially harsh sought Connie out. He wanted to apologize for his actions and begged her forgiveness. Connie reacted stiffly, considering what to do as she looked at the ex-guard's outstretched hand. She thought, Christians are to forgive, so she stoically shook the man's hand. But in that moment, she later wrote, she felt the Holy Spirit urging her own spirit to have compassion for this man who was clearly hurting in a deep way over the pain he had inflicted on her and others. Moved with compassion, she embraced the man and gave him what he yearned for. A Christian woman, who had lost so much and suffered so much in prison camp, being generous in forgiveness. An expression of love.

The Christian writer and speaker Tony Campolo tells the story of walking down a busy street one day when he saw what he referred to as a "bum" coming the other way. The man was over-dressed for the warm weather in ragged and filthy clothes. He had unkempt hair and a scraggly beard. The street person was drinking a cup of coffee as he walked down the road. As Tony neared the man, suddenly "the bum" spoke to Tony, "Hey mister, you want some of my coffee?" Tony recoiled a moment, then said, "that's very kind, but no thank you", and started again on his way. Campolo had no sooner started on his way when he had second thoughts about what he had just said. So he turned back to the homeless man and said, "Certainly, I would enjoy some of your coffee". He took a sip and said, "You've being awfully generous this morning with your coffee". And the man replied, "Well, the coffee was especially good today. And when God gives you something good, you ought to share it". Tony Campolo asked him "Well, is there anything I can give you?" He figured the guy was going to hit him up for five dollars. "Yes," the man replied, "you can give me a hug." Tony thought, "I was hoping for the five dollars". But he reached over and hugged the man, who held onto him for what seemed like forever. Campolo later wrote, "As I stood there on that busy Philadelphia street hugging this bum, I heard a voice

coming down the corridors of time saying "Inasmuch as you have done this to one of these, you have done it to me." It was a simple act of generosity in expressing love to one in need.

Stories of generosity of time, forgiveness, compassion. Indeed, generosity can be a quality that is expressed in virtually all that we do. Generosity inspired in Christians by the great gift giver. We read in the Gospel of John, "For God so loved the world that He gave...". That he gave his only begotten Son. The greatness of this gift is described in Philippians, where we read, "Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death — even death on a cross". A description again of generosity. This One, this part of the Trinity, who was with God the Father from the beginning, this One that John's Gospel tells us brought all of creation into being, gave it all up for us. And on that night in Bethlehem could be found reduced to a helpless, six pound baby, totally dependent on his awestruck family.

Generosity indeed. And so we are called to be like the page in the carol Good King Wenceslaus. We are to see the world like our Master does, through the eyes of compassion. We are to look past the hurdles that stand between us and the helping. We are to follow in his footsteps, for they are the path he provides for our ease of travel. And we are to take warmth from him, for that is his care for us as we care for others. And in this we will stretch the generosity of this season into January, February, March, April.....

"Mark his footsteps, thou Christ's page. Tread thou in them boldly".