

**St. Mark's, Niagara-on-the-Lake**  
**The Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost, year 'B' (proper 25)**  
**19 September 2021**  
**The Rev'd Leighton Lee**

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Nancy Mitford has had a recent resurgence in popularity due to the Netflix adaptation of her novel *The Pursuit of Love*. But my favourite book of hers is *The Sun King*, a biography of Louis XIV. I was thumbing through it a while ago and I came upon this amazing description of the king's first doctor, M. de L'Orme:

“De L'Orme swore by hygiene and applied his theories to himself, with the result that he lived to be ninety-four. ‘Why do fish live to such a great age? Because,’ said he, ‘they are never subject to droughts.’ So he spent his days in a sedan chair draped with blankets and lined with hares’ fur to ensure that no air could percolate. When obliged to go out, he covered himself with a morocco robe and mask and wore six pairs of stockings and several fur hats. He always kept a bit of garlic in his mouth, incense in his ears and a stalk of rue sticking out of each nostril. He slept in a sort of brick oven, surrounded by hot water bottles, and lived on sheep’s tongues and syrup of greengages—he never touched vegetables, raw fruit, jam or pastry. At eighty-seven he married a young wife; she died within the year.”

Or, as the Wisdom of Solomon says, “He became to us a reproof of our thoughts; the very sight of him is a burden to us, because his manner of life is unlike that of others, and his ways are strange”. One of the first lessons of the playground is that in order to get along, we must go along. To conform. And for most of us, that childhood lesson has cast an indelible dye on our psyches. No matter how old we get, peer pressure is real—and constant—as we’re continually caught up with trying to fit in and be liked, and are consumed with self-conscious anxiety that we’ll trip up, embarrass ourselves becoming in the process figures of ridicule and derision.

For isn’t it true that life, for all its wonder and glory, can seem remarkably like walking a tightrope: thrilling, yes; but also risky and nerve-wracking? The question “What will people think?” plays on an endless loop inside our heads, so much so that we’ve grown deaf to the voice of God that is always calling us to live authentically, truly, and fully for him—and for the sake of others.

The trouble is, it’s too easy to go about life blindly conforming to prevailing patterns and doing very little to help solve the problems of the world since they are solved only by challenging existing beliefs and established patterns. This means the non-conformist isn’t the antagonist of the more conforming viewpoint; they may represent something that the rest of us once considered ourselves, but which we ultimately set aside. Ralph Waldo Emerson said, “In every work of genius, we recognize our own rejected thoughts.” In other words, what the non-conformist restores to us—whether we wish it or not—is our own rejected thoughts.

And this is why they generally make us so uncomfortable. It's not because they think differently, but because they might make *us* begin to think differently. And here we come to something that Jesus very plainly demonstrated. He was a non-conformist. He attacked prevailing views, and the people who heard him recognized that they were hearing their own authentic inner voice which had been drowned out by that incessant ostinato: "What will people think?"

Jesus said, "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all." I'm reminded of St Francis of Assisi who grew up amidst great wealth and privilege, but after recovering from a grave illness he gave up the opulence and comfort of his father's house and moved into a small, dilapidated wayside chapel called San Damiano. There he had a mystical vision in which he heard Christ calling to him, "Francis, Francis, go and repair my house which, as you can see, is falling into ruins." And when that command registered on his soul, he found the courage to go against the expectations of his family and friends, but also to challenge people to care for and love the poor in the same manner as Christ did. It can truly be said that he rebuilt the Church in more than a physical way. He rebuilt a corrupt, worldly and decadent Church through acts of charity and love, and his selfless lifestyle inspired peasants and popes.

But none of this would have happened if Francis had preferred the road of social ease and conformity, if he had demurred at the sound of the divine voice and chosen not to make a spectacle of himself. He could have decided to put himself first, to think only of his own comfort and to consider what others thought of him as of paramount importance. As it turned out, his example of selfless service, his concern for the poor and love of the natural world continues to inspire—and challenge—us.

The Church has always needed non-conformists like Francis who have the courage to live out the challenging demands of Christ's gospel. And we need them now more than ever before. We need people who are unafraid to be themselves, who are unashamed to let their deepest experiences be a lodestar by which they journey, and who are unwilling to listen to any voice except the voice of God who calls them into authenticity of living and serving. We need people who are unafraid to take off the mask of conformity and let their true faces be seen, people who are called to re-build the world, the Church—even their own lives—through tenacity, courage, and unflinching trust.

On the road to Capernaum, the disciples were arguing who was the greatest among them. No doubt they had their checklists, their notions, their theories of what constituted greatness. Most of them thought, no doubt, that the greatest were those who were closest to Jesus. People always think that being close to, having ready access to, a really great person means that they, by extension, are also great, but Jesus said, "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all."

If you and I are to be great, *we* must become like Jesus, by learning to live as he did: on the edge of conformity, not needing the approval of the crowd—to say nothing of

its adulation. We must be willing to remove the garments of worldly approval and the masks of social acceptance before we can learn how liberating it is to put on Christ. We must learn to push ourselves beyond all of our comfortable boundaries, because only then shall we see a vision of a world remade and a Church rebuilt, where even the most humble child is given the great dignity of the Lowly King.