



So far 2016 has been a year of elections and referendums.

For example, in March in New Zealand there was a referendum about whether to retain the national flag, and the majority of the people returned a “yes” vote. Only a few weeks ago 61% of active Dutch voters rejected the Association Agreement between the European Union and Ukraine. And, of course, in June the British people will vote on remaining in the EU.

Presidential elections have occurred in Portugal, Bénin and elsewhere, and are scheduled for such places as Iceland, Zambia, Gabon, and Moldova as well as in my native United States.

With the US presidential election cycle in full swing, I'm being asked which candidate I endorse. In replying, I remain neutral. I do not pretend to be able to guide others in their political decisions, although, sometimes, I remind those who ask me of what is says in one of

wisdom books of the Bible: *When the righteous are in authority, the people rejoice; but when a wicked man rules, the people groan* (Proverbs 29:2 NKJV).

Sadly, a large part of the US population (including many Christians) *groan* merely because of the party affiliation of the person who is ruling (or running for office). The sad fact is that only a fraction of Christians vote. Of the millions of self-described evangelical Christians in the US, only about 25% voted in 2000, 23% in 2004, and 26% in 2008. The number peaked at 27% in the 2012 presidential election where 78% of the evangelicals who voted, voted for Romney and 21% for Obama.

Although our system of government gives people freedom of speech (including the right to *groan*) and freedom *not* to vote, I think Christians have a responsibility to advance the common good – a responsibility which, in part, is fulfilled by exercising their right as citizens to vote.

## The virtue of prudence

Christians have long recognized that, when the church and its members aim to influence secular authorities (thus engaging in the political process), they should do so in ways that seek *the best possible outcome available at the time for the common good*. This approach is grounded in the hope that incremental advances will lead to greater opportunity to further the common good in the “next round.” This incremental approach to advancing the common good is enjoined in the New Testament and advocated in Christian theology and ethics.

It has to do with exercising *the virtue of prudence*<sup>1</sup>. Seeking the most prudent outcome in government is not moral compromise. Prudence recognises that an all-or-nothing approach to secular governance does not foster the common good and justice. Instead such an approach undermines the limited good that a democratic political process is able to achieve among those who disagree.

With regard to imprudence, some Christians circulate (often via social media) extreme right-wing or left-wing political viewpoints that sometimes include demonizing and even lying about political opponents. Given that effective politics in a democratic system is in large part based on compromise, such extreme, uncompromising positions tend to hinder rather than help the political process. Rather than reflecting prudence, these positions are, in effect, secular forms of self-righteousness and legalism.

## The biblical injunction

The Bible tells us to desire good leaders. We conclude that this means, when possible, we will involve



ourselves in choosing those leaders. We, however, are never dependent on these leaders. As noted by the psalmist, *It is better to trust in the Lord than to put confidence in man* (Psalm 118:8 NKJV).

As Christians, we prayerfully make the best selection possible, which typically means choosing the one with the fewest problems along with the greatest strengths. Of course, we always surround that choice in prayer, then having voted, we pray for the one who is elected. Note Paul’s words to Timothy: *I exhort first of all that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and giving of thanks be made for all men, for kings and all who are in authority, that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and reverence.* (1 Timothy 2: 1-2 NKJV)

As for me, I plan to follow Paul’s exhortation, no matter who is elected US president later this year.

Let us all be in prayer as we approach elections and referendums around the world, and let’s also love all candidates as God’s children, no matter their party affiliation.

And, above all, even as we vote, let us put our trust not in politicians or in political parties, but in Jesus who is Lord of all and oversees all. He alone is the one who can and will, in his time and way, change things for the better.

Footnote:

<sup>1</sup> Concerning the Christian virtue of *prudence*, modern theologian Gary Deddo recommends two books (both published by IVP):

- *Renewing Moral Theology: Christian Ethics as Action, Character and Grace* by Daniel A. Westberg
- *Politics for the Greatest Good: The Case for Prudence in the Public Square*, by Clarke Forsythe





# Cleaning up the Story

by Eddie Marsh

In the art world lately there has been a lot of discussion about a recently discovered painting by the famous artist, Caravaggio.

It was discovered behind a locked door during repair work in a house in Toulouse, France. Apparently the door had been sealed for 150 years. It is a rather grisly piece called *Judith Beheading Holofernes*. The well-preserved image is taken from the apocryphal book of *Judith*, in which the eponymous heroine severs the head of Holofernes, who was a general in the army of the Babylonian King, Nebuchadnezzar. The painting now has to go through extensive tests in order to authenticate it as one of Caravaggio's works. There are some who think that perhaps it is not by him. Assuming, however, that it's proved to be genuine, it could be worth multiple millions of pounds.

This story reminds me of the 2012 Leonardo Da Vinci exhibition at the National Gallery, London, which was inundated with superlatives. One headline announced, "The Master has Arrived", others claimed it to be, "the most complete display of Leonardo's rare surviving paintings ever held", "an unprecedented exhibition", "the first of its kind anywhere in the world", "sensational international loans never before seen in the UK".

One highlight of that exhibition was a painting called *Christ as Salvator Mundi* (Christ as Saviour of the World). The original was recorded in the art collection of King Charles I of England but was subsequently considered to have been lost. The picture on show was for many centuries thought to be a copy, but, after undergoing extensive conservation treatment (when the painting was cleaned and studied), it was determined to be an original Leonardo. The true identity of the painting had lain dormant for years, its distinguishing features hidden under layers of crude over-paint. During conservation the truth was revealed little-by-little as successive layers of varnish and over-paint were painstakingly removed to reveal the underlying brush strokes and technique of the master painter. The picture which once sold for £45 is now valued at in excess of £120 million!

Both these paintings – *Judith Beheading Holofernes* and *Salvator Mundi* – depict ideas of deliverance. Judith is a resistance fighter who kills an invading soldier whereas Jesus, of course, reflects deliverance for all people in all places at all times.

But do the messages in both paintings get lost in the discussions about them? With the yet to be authenticated work of Caravaggio, the bravery of Judith speaks to all those in oppression throughout the ages.

Leonardo's masterpiece, if you view it as the gospel message in art form, was produced at a time when usually only clergy or the rich had access to the Bible, and also when illiteracy was commonplace. What does



it say to us now, in this age of consumerism, after centuries of cultural familiarity with Christianity?

Perhaps, the real story of Jesus has been overlooked. Just like the genuine masterpiece was difficult to appreciate due to centuries of over-painting, so too the story of Christ, contained in the major traditional events such as Easter and Christmas, is often obscured by the gloss of commercialism and superficiality. When this is over-painting is removed, then the underlying masterstrokes of God's grace are revealed and a picture emerges that is priceless: Christ is not only a personal deliverer but, as in the painting's title, *Salvator Mundi*, is also the Saviour of the world.

# The Tunnel with a Tale

by Richard Fowler

When was the last time you played Chinese whispers?

I remember one example of it going wrong! The message that the first person started with was, “Send reinforcements, going to advance.” As the message got relayed to each person, it finally came to the last person who was told, “Send three and four men, we’re going to a dance.”

It seems a simple game: all you have to do is repeat the statement that is whispered in your ear to the person next in line. Each person keeps doing this until the last person receives the message and tells everybody what was whispered to them – often with hilarious consequences – the message bearing no resemblance with what was originally said.

But what if you had to re-tell and pass on information or a story over a period of some time...let’s say, 2,700 years! Based on our experience of Chinese whispers you, like me, may not have a great deal of confidence in the story’s being passed on accurately, without any change.

Yet my lack of confidence and scepticism may be just as challenged by a tunnel that can be found in the city of Jerusalem!

I don’t know about you but I’m fascinated by history. I often want to know all the details about events as they actually happened – but most importantly, I want to know whether they are truly accurate and uncluttered by bias, lies or elaboration.

Unfortunately, people can and do try to change our perceptions of history. Whether it be Hitler’s distortion of Jewish influence in the world to promote Anti-Semitism; or the hoax of the ‘Piltdown man’ (pieces of jar and skull), which was used to mislead an aspect of evolutionary theory; or the trail of any of the alleged conspiracy theories that seem never to lose their grip on the human imagination: it is inevitable that, at some point in our lives, we will come across attempts to distort the historical record.



So, what chance is there of a story that happened some

2,700 years ago having any shred of authenticity? The answer is, more than we think, because, in this instance, tunnels don’t lie...

You see, written in one of the most enduring and well-known of all books is an exciting story about two kings: one wanted a fight and the other didn’t. Nothing exciting there, you may say. But, what was fascinating was what happened because of this national sized school-yard scrap. The king who wanted the fight was called Sennacherib, who was the king of ancient Assyria, which was located in modern-day Iraq, Syria and part of Turkey. The king who didn’t want to fight was called Hezekiah. He was the king of Judah, located in modern-day Israel with Jerusalem as its capital city – and that’s where it all happened.



There is Hezekiah, minding his own business in the small city of Jerusalem around 700BC. Sennacherib, with his army, starts to move through



neighbouring Israel, capturing many of its cities (as you do when you have too much time on your hands mixed with a very formidable army!) Sennacherib gets to Jerusalem and thinks to himself, 'I'll have some of that!', and decides to camp outside the city. Hezekiah has to hold tight. He decides to wait it out, hoping Sennacherib would get bored and just go away. Knowing he was in this waiting game, Hezekiah decides to embark on what is called the most 'ambitious water engineering feat' that the ancient world had ever seen. In an attempt to secure a water supply for the city, he decides to redirect a natural water supply just outside the city walls, into the city itself. How? By building a tunnel from the natural spring (called Gihon), through the sloping hill on which the city was built, and into the city. But...the tunnel, hewn out of hard rock, has to be nearly a mile long!

Now, if I'm going to believe this story I need to see this tunnel for myself. Therefore, last month I visited Jerusalem, and went in search of this 'Hezekiah's tunnel'. And there it was, this tunnel with a tale, nestled in the sloping hillside of one of Jerusalem's many steep hills. And better still, you can actually walk through it. It is truly a mini-wonder of the ancient near east.

As you walk down the steps to its dark but inviting entrance you are met continuously with sounds of gushing water. To think that this spring has pumped water for the last 2,700 years and more, adds to your awe of this landmark of hydro-ingenuity. As you enter the pitch black of the tunnel, with the cold current of water lashing at your feet and up to your knees, you start to wonder whether walking in a mile-long pitch-black tunnel is a good idea after all, even if it does yield evidence of a by-gone tiff between two kings.

But that's just it; this tunnel with a tale talks of more than just toil



and adventure. The very walls and stone cry out with the incontestable truth of a story that happened long ago, 2,700 years before my soles even stepped foot in this tunnel. As I walked the winding tunnel, narrow, and at times crouched, with water at my feet at all times, and the only light source being my small torch, I realised I was walking through history; history that had been penned down long ago – history that I could believe in, rely on, and most of all, see for myself was true.

This history book records:

“And when Hezekiah saw that Sennacherib had come, and that his purpose was to make war against Jerusalem, he consulted with his leaders and commanders to stop the water from the springs which *were* outside the city; and they helped him... This same Hezekiah also stopped the water outlet of Upper Gihon, and brought the water by tunnel to the west side of the City of David. Hezekiah prospered in all his works.” (2 Chronicles 32:4, 30, NKJV)

This astounding record is taken from the Old Testament history section of the Christian Bible. But not only that, Sennacherib's own history of these events: capturing towns in Israel all those years ago, including coming to Jerusalem, were recorded. His record, called Sennacherib's cylinder, is in the British museum for all to see.

With Sennacherib's side of the story too, we are left in do doubt that the Chinese whispers telling this story have been passed on unchanged for centuries!

But if you want to find out what happened in the end with Sennacherib and Hezekiah...why not read the rest of the story yourself?

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# Let There Be Light!

by Hilary Jacobs



It's a cold, misty, midwinter's morning here in Cape Town down in the southern hemisphere! The kind of morning when you want to stay in bed with a cup of hot chocolate and a good book.

Now and then there's a light patch in the sky where the sun is trying to make an appearance, but soon the mist closes in again. Even the birds seem to be sleeping late.

But I can be fairly confident that by the middle of the day the mist will have lifted and changed everything I see. It will be warmer and clearer – encouraging me to get busy with something useful.

I have just finished reading the book of Judges in the Bible, a book that resembles the weather today. It's all about the misguided actions and involvements of the Israelites after the death of their hero Joshua, who led them triumphantly into the Promised Land. Samson and Gideon break through the 'clouds' at times, but the mists of self reliance and human reasoning soon close in again. The book ends with everyone doing his own thing, even after a monstrously violent episode which rivals anything in the news today (see Judges 19 and 20).

Then I turned the page and started to read the book of Ruth, realizing that these events took place during that same gloomy period. The story of Ruth (meaning

friendship) is one of persistence and purpose. Naomi, Ruth's mother-in-law, was about to return to the land of Israel. Though Ruth insisted on following her back home, Naomi pointed out that life might be better for her if she remained with her own people, the Moabites. At least she might find another husband there, while prospects in Israel were not too good for a foreign girl. But Ruth would have none of it. Come whatever, even death, she would cling to Naomi, who had by this time changed her name to 'Mara', meaning 'bitter'. Small wonder, seeing she had lost her husband and two sons.

Back in Bethlehem, Ruth faithfully follows Naomi's instructions about gathering the leftovers of the barley harvest. She finds herself gleaning in the fields of Boaz, a relative of Naomi on her husband's side. She finally marries Boaz, her kinsman-redeemer, and is incorporated into the physical family tree of King David, the ancestor of Jesus Christ. In Old Testament law, a kinsman-redeemer was a male relative who, according to various laws of the Pentateuch, had the privilege or responsibility to act on behalf of a relative who was in trouble, danger, or need.

This story has a wonderfully happy ending for both Ruth and Naomi. It's like the sun finally breaking through here around midday.

I couldn't help seeing the similarities between the story



of Ruth and our calling as Christians. Jesus didn't promise us a bed of roses, but more likely a difficult time – “foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has no place to lay his head” (Matthew 8:20). This was His reply to a teacher of the law who wanted to follow Him. On another occasion, He made it clear that there was a cost involved in discipleship. If anyone wanted to build a tower, or consider making war with a rival, he should count the cost. There was no way it would be easy street. Like Ruth, Christians might have to forsake some of their advantages in life, perhaps even putting their calling before their own families.

But there would be huge compensations! Just as Ruth gleaned in the barley fields of Boaz and experienced his kindness and protection, so we can have spiritual reassurance when we put our lives in the hand of our

Kinsman-Redeemer, Jesus Christ. We get to have fellowship with other Christians, sometimes in a more meaningful way than with our blood relatives. And like Ruth, we are destined to marry our Kinsman-Redeemer – in fact to become the bride of Christ (Revelation 19:7-8). That's got to be the ultimate happy ending.

Though we can still see the dark clouds and storms around us, good things are happening at the same time. The gospel is being preached in places we've probably never heard of, and people are turning to Christ even in the midst of chaos and crime. This is the news we don't see – the Kingdom of God advancing steadily under the guidance of our Kinsman-Redeemer.

By the way, I see the mist has lifted and the sun is shining. There are things I must do while the weather allows.

# Second Fiddle!

by Cliff Neill

The conductor and composer Leonard Bernstein was once asked the question, “Mister Bernstein, in your opinion which is the most difficult instrument to play?”

He replied, “The Second Violin, I can get many First Violinists, but to find one who with enthusiasm plays Second Violin or Second French Horn or Second Flute is a real problem. Yet, if nobody would play Second Violin, we would not have harmony!”

It's not always easy to be second, especially if one deserves to be first. It is even more difficult to step down after having been first, and more difficult still to be ridiculed and humiliated after stepping down from being first. This, however, is exactly what Jesus Christ did, and I guess the lesson for us is to take a long hard look at what this condescension means for us.

It is because Christ took on flesh, became one of us, who are subject to this creation, that he got hurt when he fell, got hungry and thirsty. He sweated as we do and grew calluses due to his manual work as a carpenter, lifting and shaping large planks of wood, without the aid of modern power tools! Charles Wesley hit the nail

on the head when he wrote; “Our God contracted to a span; incomprehensibly made man!”

Jesus Christ didn't cling to majesty and glory as God but became flesh, blood, bone muscle and sinew just like us. He taught that only tyrants and worldly kings lord it over people. But true leaders are servants of all, and he set the example for us to follow. What a wonderful godly attitude! The Bible exhorts us to “Be good friends who love deeply; practice playing second fiddle” (Romans 12:10, The Message Bible).



It's amazing how many famous and influential people have come to this conclusion, Eleanor, the wife of American President Franklin D. Roosevelt said; “I'm glad I never feel important; it does complicate life. Tiny Mother Teresa in her humility has this to add, “We cannot do great things here on earth – only small things with great love.”

And finally C. S. Lewis observes, “Humility is not thinking less of yourself, it's thinking of yourself less.”

Let's practice playing second fiddle, shall we?

# Speaking of Life:



## Amazing Grace

The other day I was walking along, when all of a sudden, I stumbled across a section of broken sidewalk. Luckily, I caught myself before falling down. But when I turned around to see where I'd tripped, something caught my attention: two words carved into the sidewalk: "AMAZING GRACE." I had walked right over them.

That started me thinking. How often do we stumble and leave the amazing grace of God behind?

Everybody sins. The apostle Paul famously wrote: "All have sinned and fall(en) short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:23). But as Christians, we can sometimes feel like we're through with all that. We've been saved in Christ, so temptation can't touch us. That's where we run into trouble. Sooner or later, we're going to sin again. That's just part of being human. In Christian-ese, we call those slip-ups "stumbling." But the worst part of stumbling might not be the sin at all. Sometimes, people feel so much shame after they've sinned that they don't turn back to God. Instead of embracing God's free grace, they try to do a good work, balancing out the wrong with two rights. But that's not the way it's supposed to be.

In Christ, we are on a journey of sanctification, being conformed into the image of our Saviour. But it's not always a smooth process. That's where God's grace comes in. It's by this grace that we are able to access

God's forgiveness and, through Christ, be brought back into perfect communion with our Lord. See how Charles Spurgeon describes it:

Our Lord Jesus is ever giving, and does not for a solitary instant withdraw his hand. As long as there is a vessel of grace not yet full to the brim, the oil shall not be stayed. He is a sun ever-shining; his is manna always falling round the camp; he is a rock in the desert, ever sending out streams of life from his smitten side; the rain of his grace is always dropping; the river of his bounty is ever-flowing, and the well-spring of his love is constantly overflowing. (Spurgeon, *Morning and Evening*)

Christ's grace to us is never-ending. It's inexhaustible and always new. No matter how many times we stumble or how much shame we feel, God's grace is always available to us. So the next

time you're out walking around, keep your eyes open. You might just stumble right into God's amazing grace.

***Speaking of Life is now on TV! It is used by UCB (United Christian Broadcasters) in between longer programmes and is aired on UCB on Thursdays and Fridays between 7.15 - 7.30 am and between 1.45 and 2.00pm, on Saturdays between 6.45 and 7.00 am., and on Sundays between 1.45 and 2.00 pm. These timings may vary.***

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