

“Looking Back from Upside Down” (St. Peter’s Dying Retrospective)

By Dan Leatherman
Aug. 29, 2021



Background

Dan wrote this poem in the spring of 1992 (29 years ago!) and first shared it at Southside Fellowship, Elkhart, IN, in the summer of the same year. The underlying theme of the poem is a serious one: the dilemma that religious and political leaders face when caught between the opposing forces of the old and the new. But the style of the poem is quite humorous and somewhat irreverent—full of irregular rhyme patterns, puns, alliterations, and word-plays.

Poem

The Romans meant to mock you, Lord, by also crucifying me;
At least they granted my last wish--not to dishonor you in this,
But let me suffer head hung down—which makes your "Upside Down
Kingdom" at last seem strangely right side up!

The first four followers you chose—Andrew and I plus James and John--
All came from common fisher folk; I was strongest of us all—my back,
Emotions, values, and convictions; loud, stubborn, and impetuous,
With all the common prejudice, I was the "Archie Bunker of Galilee"!
Then you came along with so much that attracted me,
But you were also the "Arch De-bunker" of much we all held dear—
"You've heard it said..., but I say..." still rings in my ear as yesterday.

When I confessed you Christ, you re-named me "Rock" and gave me your
Kingdom's keys; I was always ready to seize a chance to act or speak—
"Tell us the meaning of the parable"; "We've left all--what's our reward?"
"How many times should we forgive?"

On the mount with you transfigured in the cloud, I cried; "How good, Lord,
For us to be here--with Moses, Elijah, and you; let's pitch three tents
And stay--let problems below fade from view. When you said you'd
Suffer and die, but rise again, I let you know emphatically I couldn't
Accept or understand; you "lost your cool" and called me a human
Satan—honesty made me an "adversary."

But when you begged, "Please watch and pray," I too fell asleep;
Though once awake, I quickly rose to your defense, and with my
Sword cut off the high priest's servant's ear, which you immediately
Restored, and then rebuked me yet again.

Judas betrayed you publicly to the rulers of the nation; Thomas
Shared his doubts with the local congregation; but when cornered
In the courtyard by that perceptive little maid, I denied I ever
Knew you simply because I was afraid. Was I worse than any other—
We all "forsook and fled"--yet that rooster crowing at early dawn
Wiped out whatever self-esteem remained.

You once invited me to surf the Sea of Galilee with neither board
Nor skis then had to reach out to rescue me when I recalled that
Walking on water broke Nature's law, and I began to sink right away.
'Twas not the first time nor the last fear conquered "Trust and Obey."
When I wouldn't let you wash my feet, you said refusal meant
Exclusion--that time you were patient with my confusion.

Till we met you living, your empty tomb meant only that you were gone;
So, in my post-Easter depression-blues, I returned to what I knew—
I went fishing with some of the rest, only to face another test;
All night we tried, but morning broke on empty nets. Suddenly showing
Up on shore, you slyly suggested we try on the other side of the boat,
Surprised us with a major catch and breakfast on the beach, after which
You asked if I loved you "AGAPE-style"—with God-like love; I replied
With much less bluster than before, "I love you as a friend" (PHILIA in
Greek) but doubting even that you asked twice more, though seeing
I was hurt, agreed (at least pro-tem) that PHILIA would have to do

On Pentecost I preached with power, thousands confessed your name;
When hauled before the court, I preached again, escaped from jail,
And fearlessly proclaimed, "We must obey God rather than you men!"
I spoke your word when Ananias and Sapphira died because they lied
About the sale price of their land; and when Simon of Samaria asked
To buy the Spirit's power, I cursed him in coarse Greek—
"Take your money and go to hell!"

Later came "that vision thing"—the Joppa rooftop scene—when hungry
And dreaming, three times I saw that sheet descend with animals I
Could not eat and you scolded me severely, "What God has cleansed
Don't call unclean." For me, that was a sign I must accept Cornelius
And his Gentile kind, but friends back home were still so blind—they
Thought I was "three sheets to the wind"!

At Antioch I ate with "goys"—from "goyim" (Hebrew for Gentiles)—till
Christian Jews from James made too much noise. Paul called me
A fearful hypocrite (my motives were mixed, I must admit) but just
Like Paul, I wanted to be "all things to all—to the Jews, a Jew; to the
Greeks, a Greek; and respect the ones with conscience weak."

You called me away from fishing, Lord, to feed your lambs and sheep—
Not like James withing the fold, nor in lush lofty pastures with Paul—
But always in the middle where the way was 'rough and steep."
So, I had to become a "Pontiff" too ("Pontifex"—Latin for bridge-builder),
Building bridges to try to keep all of your flock together—old and young,
Tired and frisky—building bridges is highly risky, but sorely needed if
The bio- and social diversity you've created and seem to enjoy
Is going to live in harmony.

I've often wondered all these years, but strangely never asked,
"Why, oh Lord, did you choose me for this awesome difficult task?"
Did you promote me one step above my competence level
To make me the primal example of the "Peter Principle"?
No—now at last I see more clearly than before; for all his talk of
Faith and Grace, Paul was abrasive and academic; James spoke
For those who wanted rules; and John, always a romantic, thought
Because he leaned upon your breast, we ALL could live on love alone.

Along with Archie Bunker's weaknesses, I also had his strengths;
Elitists might despise me as a "working-class deplorable," but you saw
That grounded in tradition, yet spiritually able to learn and grow,
I could lead effectively a wider spectrum of your church than could
Most other members of your team. Because the common folk could
See themselves in me, you made me your vicarious Keystone of the Arch
In that "Temple of Living Stones" where "strangers and pilgrims"—once no
people-have become the new "Peculiar People of God."

The time grow short, the way grows dark; my suffering's almost done;
If I didn't feel you by my side, I'd be completely "petrified." And if I
Could still pontificate, since I'm not there on duty yet, I'd say
That you, yourself, must meet me at Heaven's Gate!

— *Dan Leatherman (August 29, 2021)*