

The day I died, I found myself on a path to a beautiful place that I can only describe as heaven. Forget the stuff about pearly gates and St. Peter - I was met by Jesus himself. 'My reputation,' I thought smugly, 'has preceded me.'

"Hiya Jesus." I said cheerily. "Nice place you've got here."

"I'm sorry." he said, "Do I know you?"

"Of course you do! I'm Michael Wheeler - you know, the famous multi millionaire - billionaire actually."

"No." he said after some thought, "I don't know you." and went to tum away.

"Hey, wait a minute! You must know me! I used to go to Sunday School - until things got busy. I may not have been at church for a long time, but I gave a lot of money to charities - after all, I could afford it."

"Oh, you mean Mikey Wheeler? I know Mikey, but not you."

I cringed. I hadn't been called that in a long time, and I didn't like to be reminded. "Yes," I said through gritted teeth, "Mikey. Only it's Michael now."

He looked at me for what seemed to be a long time, as though he was trying to see through me. I felt uncomfortable.

After a while he said, "You didn't keep in touch."

"Well, like I said, things got busy. I got involved in supporting my family...."

"Making money, you mean."

"I was only doing what everybody wants - becoming successful." I said indignantly. "Besides, I didn't really need your input. I just happened to be gifted in the area of finance, and used my gift well. I bought and sold businesses, and made creative use of the country's tax laws - everybody in business does it. I stand before you as a self made man. Anyway, where were you in all this? You certainly weren't making yourself known to me!"

"I was with those... " he replied " ... whom you sacked because they dared to contradict you. I was with the workers you made redundant by moving your companies offshore, and with their families. I was with the poor, the ones you exploited for cheap labour in the developing countries you moved your business to. I was with those who lost limbs and life because of your cost-cutting and poor safety standards."

Now I was angry. "Now wait just a minute. If it wasn't for me those people wouldn't have *had* jobs and incomes. Besides, all that safety stuff I left to my managers and lawyers. I can't be accountable for every detail. Anyway, there's always some collateral damage in these things. You can't make an omelette without breaking eggs!"

He was silent for a while, and I thought he was coming round to my point of view. However, I was wrong.

"Mikey Wheeler is welcome here. But not you. As I said, you I don't know."

"But I *am* Michael - er - Mikey!"

"Oh, Mikey's in there somewhere. He's just been suffocated by all your fancy dress."

"Fancy dress? What fancy dress!"

"All the stuff you fancy gives you power and fuels your self esteem. The power you craved and hoarded over a lifetime."

"But I have been a huge success!"

"I didn't ask for your success. I asked for your faithful friendship."

I was experiencing something I hadn't felt for a long, long time - guilt and shame.

"You must choose," he said, "whether you keep your garments or whether you undress."

"But if I lose all this, I'll have nothing!"

By this time I was whining. I was Mikey again, desperate for a bike for my birthday that my parents couldn't afford. Ashamed to be

going to school with torn jeans and shoes full of holes. Vowing that as soon as I could I would escape this poverty. Yet here was Jesus telling me that it was precisely these poor that he favoured over me!

I was also remembering the bible stories from Sunday school, and how the figure of Jesus fascinated me. I think it was the love that got to me, the kind of love I desperately needed, given my circumstances. Somehow, though, I had turned my back on that love when I didn't get what I wanted (the bike, or whatever), and began to exert power that made me feel good, going on to bully my way through life.

"You, must choose." Jesus said simply. There was a finality about this statement which told me that the conversation was at an end. Again he turned to go.

"Wait!" I said. "I'm not sure how to do that.... you know.... undress. Will you help me?"

He stopped and turned back, then held his hands out to receive the discarded clothes. I saw the raw imprints of wounds in each hand, and suddenly saw why he was so concerned with those whom I had wounded, and I began to weep.

It took a long time for me to strip off my 'fancy dress', as Jesus put it, not only because it came in thick layers, but because I agonised over some of it, like the freedom that my wealth bought me, and the respect of others. But in all cases, Jesus helped me see that it wasn't really freedom - it was total dependence on money; and in most cases it wasn't respect - it was a desperate need for others to please me in order to not be fired. Even when the respect *was* real, I didn't really appreciate it, because, as far as I was concerned, I had generated that respect, so it really wasn't a gift on the part of the giver.

Finally I stood before Jesus naked, but free of the heavy load that in earthly life I hadn't even recognised as a burden.

It was then that he produced a beautiful white robe and lovingly dressed me in it.

"Ah yes," he said, "*now* I know you."

## Fancy dress

*Matthew 22:1-14*



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