

## Compelled to Faith

*And the master said to the servant, “Go out to the highways and hedges and compel people to come in, that my house may be filled”. Luke 14:23*

Two men sat, their weary faces revealing that they had neither slept nor eaten properly for some time. Perspiration was rolling off their faces. You could feel the dry heat from the middle-eastern land where they were held captive, even through the screen. One after another they read from a prepared statement which began “There is no god but Allah and Mohammed is his prophet”. It was in halting, stammering English, not because it was their Second Language but rather like someone who had a gun held to their head.

The watching world had their suspicions confirmed. These men literally had a gun held to their heads because in 2006 two men, Steve Centanni, 60, an American correspondent, and his freelance cameraman Olaf Wiig, 36, a New Zealander, were taken captive by Islamic militants. What expectations their captives may have had concerning the legitimacy of their conversion is unknown, but their captors believed they were on a mission from God. The men were later released and dropped off by Palestinian security forces at a hotel in Gaza City before ultimately making their way home.

Is this the kind of compelling we are to engage in as Christians? Can we cite Scripture “compel them to come in” and use all manner of force? Persecutors and Inquisitors of various times in Church History have cited this very verse to do that. Others, being more subtle, have put conversion to the faith as a condition for employment or education and all other sorts of positions of material or social benefit.

But in haste to pick up the sword, or the lure of material betterment, they have missed considering whether there is another kind of compelling to be understood here. It is one that doesn't just move a man's lips, as our captives described above did at the pointing of a gun, but a compelling unseen power that moves a heart.

There is the conviction in a man's heart placed there by the Holy Spirit. Here the compelling nature of the Holy Spirit working through the Word is alluded to as “The Hammer” by the prophet Jeremiah or “The Sword of the Spirit” by the Apostle Paul. And Paul experienced the weight of conviction so he had to say, “For necessity is laid upon me. Woe to me if I do not preach the gospel!” 1 Corinthians 9:16.

This is the kind of compelling we speak of today. It is the call of the Gospel. It's the story of God's love which we respond to saying the words of Paul “We love, because he first loved us.

It is a story of love, devotion and perseverance towards a people that finally, after much struggle enables the Master to say “Come, for everything is now ready”. We who heed such words with understanding of all that it took to prepare such a meal stand aghast. Our jaw drops. For to get ready to host the Wedding Feast of the Lamb many things had to be put in order. Israel had to be called into nationhood to give birth to a New Israel. A

Sea needed to be crossed and a people entering into the land of Canaan before people could be called into a Heavenly Cannan. Sacrifices of lambs and the blood of countless numbers shed as a foreshadowing and teaching before the perfect Lamb of God could be sacrificed on the cross that would permanently remove the barrier between God and man. A Temple built and rebuilt and rebuilt again before the fulfilment could come in the Messiah who referred to himself as the *Temple*. ***“Destroy this temple he said and in three days I will rebuild it”***. Prophets had to be called. Miracles and wonders had to be worked. A people had to be prepared. A Son had to be born and not just at anytime but “in the fullness of time”. A Son had to die. All as prophesized in great detail. A Messiah had to rise from the dead and ascend into heaven. The Holy Spirit had to be sent. The Church established. Apostles, pastors and deacons called to preach the Gospel. Baptisms performed. The Eucharist celebrated. The message had to go to the ends of the earth.

“Come, for everything is now ready” isn’t exactly opening a can of Chicken Noodle Soup and slicing off a piece of bread for a child’s lunch. It is the Feast of Feasts. It’s the culmination of the shedding of blood and sacrificing the perfect Lamb of God.

Yes, “Come for everything is now ready” is anticipation of the ages realized. We shudder at those words. We heed the call. And as we contemplate the work of Christ further we shudder all the more and race harder to the table. We race to the table in the Kingdom of Grace by participating in the Lord’s Supper. We race to the table it points to in the Kingdom of Glory where we participate in the Marriage Supper of the Lamb. We share the urgency as we contemplate the end of days with the great cloud of witnesses surrounding us at the supper so that we “lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us...”(Hebrews 12:1) We become more miffed than ever over the excuses given by those who refuse to come. We ought to become more miffed at our own tardiness and ingratitude towards the Lord’s Table.

Nevertheless we who are here have come. After all we are here today. Our own understanding of the Master’s words “Come, for everything is now ready” ought to grow as we grow in the faith. Do we stand at the table with our Master ready to serve?

When you read the Church Fathers and earliest commentators on this passage of Scripture there is much speculation as to the identity of the slave who goes forth. Some say John the Baptist or the Prophets. Others, with good grammatical argument identify the servant or slave *or doulos* as it is in the Greek with Jesus Christ Himself.

And the true answer, as with most theological difficulties resides in synthesis. The slave is Christ Jesus in his humanity. And as Christians who have the Christ dwelling within us and who have already come to the table we are to join him.

Go out quickly to the streets and lanes of the city, and bring in the poor and crippled and blind and lame. Jesus is the first one to have done so. He is the one to have fulfilled the prophecy of Isaiah, chapter 61:

1 The Spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me,  
because the LORD has anointed me  
to bring good news to the poor;  
he has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted,  
to proclaim liberty to the captives,  
and the opening of the prison to those who are bound;

Yes, go with Jesus among the poor, the lame, the blind and the lepers. Go with Jesus among the timid and those faint of heart. Go with Jesus to those ensnared in despair and languishing in their state of perpetual mourning.

But do we heed this command. We have a hard time with it. Here comes trouble. Here come the special needs whose contributions reside in the intangible realm when what we really want or think we need are those whose contributions reside in the tangible realm. Many who think it are afraid to say it. "Food bank recipients who come to the church, even if you get them to come to the church won't be able to give to the church". "Those who can't speak English very well or have computer skills won't be able to take on leadership positions". They can hardly help themselves let alone help us.

But we have forgotten that the very people God uses most are those who are weakest. Who was Israel? They were slaves in Egypt. Yet God's plan was to deliver them into the Promised Land that they might be a light unto the Gentiles! Who was Moses but a murderer and without confidence who complained "I do not know how to speak"? Who was John the Baptist but a rag wearing eater of honey and locusts? Who was Paul but probably half blind himself. "See how large I must now write my letters" he said to his readers? What description do we have of the earliest Christians?

**not many** of you were **wise** according to worldly standards, **not many** were powerful, **not many** were of noble birth. (1 Corinthians 1:26)

And yet they became the salt of the earth and eternal stars shining in eternity! Still, the most powerful motivator for heeding the command isn't the recognition that God can take the weak and make them strong in the Lord, although that is true. The most powerful motivator is knowing the love God has shown us who are weak, lame, blind and poor in the most debilitating ways if not physical.

Do we heed this command. Still the Master has another. "Go out to the highways and hedges and compel people to come in, that my house may be filled". We know with what truly compels. It is the Hammer of God's Law that first softens hearts followed by the Gospel Message of God's Love and forgiveness that makes them strong in the Lord.

We have the promise concerning the efficacy of God's Word. "My Word will not return to me void" . Furthermore we have seen God's Word in action in the lives of the saints. We have the Acts of the Apostles. We have witnesses to the growth brought forth by the Word of God in their preaching. Still the Church stands today. And the gates of hell shall not prevail against her.

May the Lord therefore grant to us who heed the invitation of the Lord to come, see such an invitation written in the precious blood of Jesus, holding onto it with passion. I met an Indian man at our recent Gospel concert who illustrates everything I've been saying to you today. After we spoke for some time, he took a very important looking paper out of his pocket. It was a Royal invitation to attend St. James Cathedral from when the Queen had visited years ago. He wanted me to look at it carefully to see that it wasn't printed on some common paper like our bulletins but on a kind of bleached linen paper. The lettering was gold leaf. His pew was numbered "C" row. A commoner would not expect better than that. He clearly valued it above all his possessions. But as a Christian we value this other invitation to the Lamb's Supper greater for it is written on our hearts in the precious blood of Jesus. May we share such an invitation with the world. And by such love, compel many to come in.

Amen.