

“The Human Factor”
Luke 1: 67-79
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Charisma is defined as “a divinely conferred gift or power,” from the Greek meaning “the gift of grace.” There is nothing more essential to effective and inspirational leadership than charisma, and you know it when you see it.

Jesus had the gift of *charisma* — but also the gift of true humanity. Both are essential for walking in the way of peace.

Two years ago during the Advent season, a movie was released called “Invictus.” It was a movie about Nelson Mandela, who was South Africa’s first black president.

The movie was directed by Clint Eastwood and he said that Nelson Mandela “has great *charisma*.” Mandela “had the charisma to bring the country together, and the unique way he did that is what this story, this movie, is all about.”

More on the story in a minute, but first, let’s look at our scripture passage today from Luke, the prophecy of a priest named Zechariah.

A baby named John had just been born to Zechariah and his wife Elizabeth — this is the child who will grow up to be John the Baptist and Luke tells us that “his father Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke this prophecy.”¹

“Blessed be the Lord, the God of Israel, for he came and set his people free”²

Zechariah rejoices because he senses that God is making a bold and decisive move to enter human life and rescue his chosen people.

“He has set the power of salvation in the center of our lives, and in the very house of David his servant,”³

¹ Luke 1: 67

² Luke 1: 68

³ Luke 1: 69

“And you, my child, Prophet of the Highest, will go ahead of the Master to prepare his ways; you will present the offer of salvation to his people, the forgiveness of their sins.”⁴

The Master and the prophet of the Most High; the births of these two little boys remind us that God rarely works alone, but usually through a human factor. They are signs to Zechariah that God is alive and well and working to save his people from their enemies and from the hand of all who hate them, and the result of this divine intervention will be that:

“God's Sunrise will break in upon us,
shining on those in the darkness,
those sitting in the shadow of death,
then showing us the way, one foot at a time,
down the path of peace.”⁵

The coming of these two children is designed “to guide our feet into the way of peace.” It’s a gift of God – a divine gift; it is *Charisma*.

But peace doesn’t exist in a vacuum. It also requires the Human Factor.

“Invictus” is the true story of how Nelson Mandela worked to unite his racially and economically divided country in the mid-1990s. The movie is adapted from the book, “Playing the Enemy, Nelson Mandela and the Game that Changed a Nation.”

Interestingly enough the movie in its early stages had the working title, “The Human Factor.” It was changed to “Invictus” which means “unconquered” and comes from the poem of the same name. It was the poem that Nelson Mandela had on a scrap of paper on his prison cell wall. Its final two lines read:

“I am the master of my fate
I am the captain of my soul.”⁶

⁴ Luke 1: 76-77

⁵ Luke 1: 78-79

⁶ From “Invictus,” a poem by William Ernest Henley

As you know, Nelson Mandela was for decades South Africa's leading opponent of apartheid, the white government's official policy of racial segregation. His opposition to apartheid resulted in his being in prison for 27 years, but in 1990 he was released — and then in 1994 he was elected South Africa's first black president.

In 1995, South Africa hosted the Rugby World Cup Tournament. Rugby was a white man's game, and the South African team was entirely white, representing a country that was 80 percent black. Its team symbol was a leaping gazelle called a "springbok." That mascot reminded most black South Africans of the country's racist history.

Black president – white team; and after 27 years in prison, you might think Nelson Mandela wouldn't look favorably on these players.

But you would be wrong.

Mandela showed up at a press conference wearing a Springbok rugby jersey and cap. He said,

"These are our boys now. They may all be white, but they're our boys, and we must get behind them and support them in this tournament."

The next day, the Springbok coach took his team to the prison where Mandela had spent nearly three decades of his life behind bars. The coach said,

"This is the cell where Nelson Mandela was imprisoned. He was kept here for 27 years by the racist policies of our government. We tolerated his imprisonment for all those years, and yet he has backed us publicly. We can't let him down."

The tournament opened, and the Springboks played beyond everyone's expectations. In fact, they made it into the final game.

President Mandela was in the stands for that final game and he was wearing his Springbok jersey. Just prior to the game he brought a South African children's choir out of the stands, and they led over 65,000 people in the singing of a black African miner's song.

When the Springbok's took the field, they were unstoppable, and that day they won the Rugby World Cup Championship.

For the next 24 hours, whites danced with blacks in the streets of South Africa and for the first time, they saw each other as fellow citizens of a multi-racial country.

“God's Sunrise will break in upon us,
shining on those in the darkness,
those sitting in the shadow of death,
then showing us the way, one foot at a time,
down the path of peace.”⁷

This line from Zechariah's prophecy came true in the 1995 Rugby World Cup Tournament. The way of peace appeared in an inspiring and instructive way. It required a gift of God – *charisma*. But it also required the Human Factor.

We can take this Scripture and story to heart as we prepare for Christ's coming during this Advent season. This is the time of year to reflect on the rich mixture of divinity and humanity that came to earth in Jesus, the incarnation.

The Advent season is the time to discover what Jesus and his life can teach us about the way that God can work through each of us.

Jesus shows *charisma*, the gift of God — but also humanity. After all, he was fully God and fully human. Both are essential for walking in the way of peace. And both can be present in us, as well.

Notice, first of all, that Jesus honors the Human Factor in everyone he meets. In the letter to the Hebrews the author states:

“Jesus is not ashamed to call them brothers and sisters; He had to become like his brothers and sisters in every respect, so that he might be a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God.”⁸

⁷ Luke 1: 78-79

⁸ Hebrews 2:11, 17

Jesus does not despise the humanity of the people he meets but honors everyone as a fellow child of God.

So did Mandela, when he said of the Springboks,

“They may be all white, but they’re our boys, and we must get behind them.”

So did the coach of the South African rugby team, who said that because President Mandela backed them publicly,

“We can’t let him down.”

Jesus also knows that divine gifts such as *charisma* require community. Jesus himself needed John the Baptist to be:

“The prophet of the Most High” and to “go before the Lord to prepare his ways”⁹

Zechariah needed a community to hear his Spirit-filled prophecy and respond in faith.

President Mandela needed the Springbok coach, the Springbok coach needed Mandela, and both needed a nation of blacks and whites willing to support the team together.

Finally, the combination of *charisma* and the Human Factor leads us to a new way of living together in the world — what Zechariah calls “the way of peace.”¹⁰

Peace isn’t simply escape from the hands of those who hate us, or rescue from our enemies or a period of time in which we’re free from violence.

No, peace is a way of life in which we serve God without fear, “in holiness and righteousness before him all our days.”¹¹

⁹ Luke 1: 76

¹⁰ Luke 1: 79

¹¹ Luke 1: 73

The way of peace isn't simply the absence of conflict. Instead, it's the presence of holiness, righteousness, and justice.

This means being devoted to God and in a right relationship with God and with each other. Holiness, righteousness, and justice are the qualities of a life of peace, a life marked by harmonious relationships, both human and divine.

Clearly, the way of peace isn't easy to achieve, and life in South Africa has had its share of violence and turmoil since the day of celebration that followed the Springbok victory. But we Christians continue to pursue this way of life. We do it best by following Jesus, who is the Prince of Peace.¹²

With Jesus' example of honoring the Human Factor in everyone, we discover how to love and respect each other.

In his commitment to community, we learn that our gifts from God are most powerful when they are shared.

And in Jesus' life of holiness, righteousness, and justice, we see an example of what it means to live in right relationship with God and with each other.

Jesus is our mighty Savior, the one and only Son of God. But as unique as he is, he reaches out to us and makes a connection through the Human Factor, which he shares with everyone on earth, young and old, male and female, black and white, American and South African.

Jesus is behind us and supporting us, as we walk the way of peace.

Let us not let him down.

Amen!

¹² Isaiah 9: 6