

The Leader of the Synagogue by Michael Ventura *The Sun – Dec. 2001*

When it comes to God we are all amateurs.

Even the leader of the synagogue

in that lakeside town, a place

We mustn't underestimate

just because it didn't have

All the modern conveniences:

e-mail, handguns, billboards of half-naked girls.

Clearly it was a place as easily stirred to incoherence

as any place, so it was "modern" enough.

Certainly its people grasped at straws as we do,

and when they achieved a moment of coherence

In the midst of their shared incomprehension --

It was noteworthy, and took courage, as it still does.

This leader of the synagogue, he deserved to be leader

for he chose his words well

Even under great duress, on that hot afternoon.

His daughter was dying. She was twelve years old.

And just as he feared the worst

He heard a big commotion

Two or three streets away -- in a town without machines,

Without the oversound of many machines near and far,
The noise of human commotion carried a good long way.
You don't like to hear a lot of bruhaha when your child
 is dying. It's unbearable, in fact. Almost insulting.
Yet you can't help but ask what it is -- though
Everything inside you is bursting, you ask,
 you can't help it.
"It's that prophet -- or they call him a prophet --
 that one who passed through here
 some months ago,
 while you were on pilgrimage, the Nazarene --
He and his hangers-on are walking here again
And the people are making a fuss."
You can't help but hope, even risking blasphemy,
Is he really a prophet? Can he heal? Are the stories true?
Your daughter is dying. Rather than sit there helpless
You go to him. Grasping at straws. Who wouldn't?
As soon as you heard his name
 you knew you'd humble yourself, ask him, beg him,
Say anything -- and quickly too, before she dies.
You do not rationalize, you do not ask, What is the harm
For a Jew to beg of a Jew, even for something fantastic,
To save the life of a little girl, a little Jewish girl?

You have no idea that you're making an entrance
upon the stage of the epic. You barely even know
You're walking, running -- merely
That you're propelling yourself toward him, bursting inside.
You are crushed with disappointment when you see him:
He looks like any other man. You feel like an idiot.
Perhaps you've wasted the most precious moments of
your life. And then he turns toward you.
And you see at least why they call him a prophet:
Unlike any other eyes you've ever seen --
except the eyes of children, like your daughter--
His eyes aren't filters, aren't sieves, they're not
Constantly deciding
what to let in, what to keep out,
They are absolutely open, they are not judging,
They are letting everything in and everything out,
and they're looking at you.
Eyes that hold nothing back.
This gives you such hope that you think you're going insane.
You blurt out what you want of him.
If you can do something, have pity on us and help us.

"If?" he says. How can he take offense? This is no time for taking offense!

What's he saying now?

“To those who believe, all things are possible.”

This is no time for preaching!

Now he's asking you a question. There isn't time!

But this one seems to have

all the time in the world.

You're furious. Afraid.

“Do you believe I can do this?”

Two answers are running through your head like panicked

animals: Yes. No. No. Yes. Maybe. Yes. No.

Suddenly you are absolutely amazed that you're not

going to lie.

You never expected to be tested like this,

never in your life.

Your daughter is dying, but you are

the leader of the synagogue. You've lied before,

Like any man, but too much is at stake: you cannot lie now.

“Lord, I believe; help thou mine unbelief.”

Your answer let everything in and let everything out.

Which is apparently all this Jesus wants of you.

For now, anyway. Today, anyway.

Which is every day that ever was or will be,

as far as you're concerned.
He turns to follow you to your home,
a Jew accompanying a Jew
On a matter of inexpressible urgency.

But then the bruhaha takes over.
You never imagined you could feel so frustrated,
So utterly infuriated -- and at your fellow-sharers,
your congregation, after all.
You are the leader of the synagogue, they all know you,
They know what is happening right now in your home,
But this Jesus seems to radiate to others
a kind of compulsion, a simultaneity
Of coherence and incoherence, everything in everyone
let in and let out at once... later,
After the blessing, when things have quieted down
And you feel something like yourself again,
in spite of your thankfulness
You will contemplate, you will consider:
This is terribly dangerous. I owe him much,
And I will honor my debt, but still:
This is terribly dangerous, this effect he has on us...
...there's pushing, shoving, grabbing,

The crowd moves at a crawl, falling over each other,
They don't seem to care that your daughter is dying,
And now he stops! You could die yourself, right now,
of pure frustration.

He's stopped! Is he crazy? And now, because he's stopped,
Everyone stops, and people step away from him.

"Who touched me? Someone touched me."

His hangers-on are a few burly fishermen, given to drink,
Whom you've known all your life -- good men, maybe,
But not exactly the stalwarts of your congregation.

And now they're smiling! How can they smile
at a time like this?

Simon, a rough man, prone to confusions
but generous in his way, and a hard worker,

He's talking to this prophet as though to a child:

"All these people pushing and shoving
and you ask, 'Who touched me'!"

"Someone touched me. I felt the Power go out of me."

Your head is bursting, absolutely bursting.

You could have stayed and blessed your daughter's last
breath. Instead you filled with a wild hope,

And it's made you an idiot. You are thinking that never,
Never, can you forgive yourself. You have sinned
Against your family and God. The congregation
Be damned. You cannot, in honesty, lead them again.

This is the last day of your life,

no matter how long it takes you to die.

He's looking around, wondering who touched him!

Shouldn't he know, if he's truly a prophet of God?

He's looking with those same unbearable eyes.

You hear, through the commotion, like a needle

Stuck into your ear, the mourning-wail of your wife.

It is too late. You have failed everyone --

Yourself, your daughter, your wife, your God, everyone.

And The Woman of the Blood -- that's what you call her,

what everyone calls her,

The unclean one, the woman no one can come close to

Without incurring uncleanness before God,

She who has bled from the unclean place for years and years,

She says she touched him -- and that she is cleansed!

Healed! This terrible woman -- whose affliction is,

without doubt, payment for some sin --

She has stepped into your daughter's place. So selfish.

So unbearably selfish. For the first time in your life

You are angry at God. How could He
Allow such incongruity? And now you know that,
No matter what happens,
You can no longer lead the synagogue. You have sinned,
By that thought, you've sinned utterly. You are doomed.
Crushed, dazed. His words to the woman mean nothing to you:
"Go in peace. Your faith has healed you."
And now your friends -- and you'll never, in your heart,
Call them 'friends' again -- they approach, they say,
"Your daughter has died. Don't bother the rabbi
any further."
Bother? Is that what you were doing? A scream
is building inside you
That you know you are not large enough to scream,
you will never wholly scream
The great scope and expanse of this scream,
And you know this as you stand mute and stupid and afraid.
You will even fail to scream. Even that.
But he says: "You people
don't know what you're talking about.
The girl is merely sleeping."
And they laugh.
They laugh!

You cannot believe

that, at this moment,

You are hearing laughter.

You have known them all your life, but who are these people?

Everyone has become a stranger,

and you have become a stranger to yourself,

And that is the doing of this prophet.

You never imagined that any moment could take this long

to pass. This Jesus has altered Time itself.

Your daughter has died innocent

but your soul is dying of guilt.

Your home is mere paces ahead. It seems

a thousand miles.

Your wife is standing in front of it. She has aged

a thousand years.

And you, too. A thousand years. Maybe all you saw

Was a blankness in his eyes. They are

curiously blank.

How can you ever be forgiven?

He asks you and your wife to come inside.

And Simon, who, as a joke, he calls The Rock.

And a couple of others, hangers-on, whom you

don't recognize. Maybe you've known them all your life
But you don't recognize them anymore.

There she is. And, yes, she's dead. She looks

like she's sleeping, but so do all the dead,
In those first moments of death.

You're not even looking at his eyes now.

Later you'll wish you had.

If he could know how fast your half-faith passed,

he never would have come. Or would he?
He bends over her. "Talitha,

Cumi." Little girl,

Arise.

And she does!
The hell of it is: now, when the miracle
is facing you,

You cannot accept it. Everything in you

Has been let out; how long will it take

for anything
To come back into you? Even your precious daughter.

"Give her something to eat," he says.

Yes, of course, something to eat.

"Tell no one about this."

Well, he is mad. Even if we didn't speak of it

Everyone would know -- and how

can we not speak of it? The request

Is inhuman. Much later, when they say he wasn't human,

You will partially agree.

Your daughter will never seem the same in your eyes.

You will not love her any less, and yet...

It will never seem again like she's really your daughter.

You must have passed the test, for here she is alive.

But you didn't pass the test, for you have died

to yourself.

Those words you said to the Nazarene...

they will be precious forever.

But that wouldn't matter to you even if you knew it.

Because you can no longer lead the congregation.

In what was only -- what? fifteen minutes? less? --

you've lived your whole life.

You will be loyal to the blessing.

Thankful.

You will stand up for him -- how can you not?

And you will pay a price for that, but you won't mind,

for it's a debt you owe.

But you will never feel yourself again, not really,

not wholly.

That, apparently, is his gift,

His terrible unalterable gift.

When your time comes, you will be grateful for death.

And yet your last prayer will be:

I do not want to die

far from this begging of Thee.