

**Fr. Connell**  
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Sir Arthur Conan Doyle created Sherlock Holmes just a few years after Gonzaga University opened. I have been a devoted reader of the Holmes stories since I was introduced to the Great Detective by the novel *The Hound of the Baskervilles*. There is a great moment in one of the Sherlock Holmes stories in which Holmes and Watson are sitting around their flat in Baker Street enjoying the fact that they are white, Protestant, Anglo-Saxon males in the late 1890's when White, Protestant, Anglo-Saxon males ruled the world and they begin to argue about their respective detective skills. Watson—who in the stories is not usually the fool many movie versions make of him—nonetheless makes the very foolish claim that he is just as observant of details as Holmes is.

Holmes then asks Watson how many steps there leading from their front door up to the floor on which their rooms are located. Watson not only cannot provide the *right* answer, he can't even come up with a *wrong* one. Holmes, of course, knows exactly how many steps there are, because he's Sherlock Holmes and he knows everything.

He lets Watson down as gently as he can by telling him, "You see, Watson, but you do not observe."

Whenever he forced to deal with the cerebral limitations of mere mortals like Dr. Watson and Inspector Lestrade of Scotland Yard, Holmes must know exactly what the author of the Book of Wisdom means when he says—if I may paraphrase a bit--"scarce do we guess the things on earth, and what is within our grasp we find with difficulty; but when things are in heaven, who can search them out?"

In fact, all three of today's readings remind us of both the difficulty and the necessity of seeing what is fundamentally, essentially true in the Gospel if we are to follow Christ and not, instead, to find ourselves following someone else off to heaven only knows where. The second reading is taken from Paul's letter to Philemon. In fact, the second reading is about *half* OF the Letter to Philemon. The letter to Philemon is so short that if Paul had had an iPhone, the Letter to Philemon might well have just "the text message to Philemon," although the auto correct would probably have turned it into "Paul's letter to Philadelphia." In some editions of the Bible, the whole book of Philemon fits on just one page. Scholars agree that it the words are those of Paul himself and at one point in the text Paul even says he actually wrote with his own hand instead of dictating it as he often did.

Now I must confess that I've never really liked St. Paul's letters much. I'm sure St. Paul doesn't like my letters either and, on the whole, the two of us would probably both be much happier if I confined myself to preaching on lurid Victorian detective stories, rather than his letters. But I do think the letter to Philemon is remarkable as one of the first and finest pieces of Catholic guilt ever set down on paper. The letter has nothing to do with the questions of doctrine and religious law that Paul often get wrapped up in. It's about a

**person**, a slave named Onesimus who has run away from his master Philemon and what Philemon ought to do about it.

They're both Christians. So Paul uses the situation to show Philemon the logical impossibility of treating someone whom he considers his brother in Christ as a piece of property. You can't do it, Paul says. It makes no sense. It's intellectually dishonest even to try. The **essential truth** here is not the social conventions which allow Philemon to say he "owns" Onesimus. It's not the "penalty" which Onesimus has supposedly incurred by escaping. The **essential truth** is that Onesimus and Philemon are both human beings for whom Jesus Christ died and Onesimus is Philemon's brother . . . in the Flesh and in the Lord." Once Philemon understands that, there no question what he has to do. He certainly cannot have Onesimus crucified, which was the usual punishment for runaway slaves in ancient Rome, as anyone who has seen Kirk Douglas in SPARTACUS knows.

In the Gospel reading from Luke, Jesus uses some very sharp verbal hyperbole to force the mob who THINK they are his disciples to stop and consider exactly what being disciple means.

Obviously, when Jesus says we should hate our mothers and fathers, he's not suggesting that we all enroll in the Lizzie Borden school of domestic anger management. In Matthew's version of this statement, Jesus is just saying that we must love him MORE than we love our families or ourselves. Luke ups the ante with a dash of hyperbolically vivid Middle Eastern rhetoric by when Jesus demands that we "hate" our biological families and ourselves.

But what is the essential truth behind that hyperbole? Well, if we put this reading in its literary and historical context the truth jumps out at us like Hound of the Baskervilles at a cat show. **Literarily**, Luke tells this story immediately after the parable of the "Royal Banquet No One Wanted to Attend." In that parable, a king gives a banquet to which he invites all his leading citizens, but they all make excuses about how they are too busy with other things and can't come.

Those "other things" that keep us from coming to the *Eternal* King's table are what Jesus is telling we need to "hate." And in saying that we should "*hate*" our parents, siblings, and children, Jesus is really saying that each one of us is going to have to sacrifice something very, very precious in order to do the will of God. We must ready, Jesus says, to set aside relationships, security, possessions—All those things we BELIEVE we **need** to be happy—and be ready to take up in the Cross in their place---to take up the ultimate symbol of what we find unpleasant, difficult, and frightening when serving God demands that of us.

In a historical context, Jesus also has very good reasons for telling this mob following him to Jerusalem that if they are looking for glory and loot, they've got the wrong Messiah. When I was in CCD at St. Ann's parish in Butte, Montana, back when dinosaurs ruled the earth, they frequently told us that many of the people who followed

Jesus expected him to be a heroic, military messiah who would drive the Romans out of Judea and re-establish the empire of King David. Whenever I heard that, I thought, “What a bunch of morons.” I’d seen all those Italian Hercules movies at the summer Saturday matinees at the Fox Theater in beautiful downtown Butte. I knew that anybody who thought Jesus was going to conquer Steve Reeves was dumber than a bag of hammers.

The only problem is that for a century, from about 140 BC to 37 BC, not all that long before Baby Jesus was born, the Jews had done precisely that. Under Judah Maccabee and his brothers, the Jews had driven out their Greek conquerors, the Seleucids, and re-dedicated the Temple to Yahweh in a victory that Jewish people still celebrate at Hannukah, minted their own currency for a hundred years, established dynasty of Jewish kings called the “Hasmoneans” and—basically—re-established the kingdom of David.

Now if seven brothers and their guerilla army could drive out the successors of Alexander the Great, why wouldn’t people think that a man who could walk on water and raise the dead could get rid of a couple of deadbeats like Pontius Pilate and Mark Antony and a bunch of incestuous trust-fund creeps like the Herods?

However, Jesus--it’s clear from everything written about him, had no interest in earthly kingship or Maccabean revolutions. He needed everyone who wanted to follow him to understand that following him meant service, not power.; in security, not wealth; not the freedom to exploit others, but the challenge to sacrifice oneself for them.

That is what Jesus wanted this mob and us to see as the essential thing. A “Christianity” that allows us to exploit or abuse our brothers and sisters is not Christianity. It’s a tower that’s half built, created by a king who’s doomed to fail. It’s a set of stairs that we’ve walked up and down a thousand times without ever noticing them enough even to hazard a guess when asked how many there are.

“When you have eliminated the impossible, whatever remains, however improbable must be the truth,” Sherlock Holmes tells Dr. Watson in the novel *THE SIGN OF FOUR* and 5 short stories.

What “must be the truth” for Christians is the “Mystery of our faith” which we repeat in some form during each Eucharist prayer: “Christ has died; Christ is risen; Christ will come again.” Christ’s death gave Christ’s life its ultimate meaning. And if we are to be his disciples, we cannot bind ourselves to anything that prevents us from living with the same selfless freedom that Christ did.