

I am sure most of us are familiar with the game “Snakes and Ladders” For those not familiar with the game, players shake the dice and move their pieces along a path. As with all these games, reaching the top is the goal. But in “Snakes and Ladders” there’s a catch. Of course! If you land on one of the spaces with a ladder, you get to climb past many spaces (and many opponents) to a higher place. But if you land on a space with a snake, you will tumble all the way down the path, and you are likely to be the loser.

My sense is that many people perceive life in the very same way. Life is about getting ahead, about accumulating wealth and fame and achievement. We use the phrase “Climbing the ladder of success” and it is what drives many of us in this world, including clergy! Conversely, we desperately avoid the snakes. Failure of any kind in this world sends us backward down the path of wealth and success and notoriety. When we tumble, we lose ground on our opponents, and in the eyes of the world, we are losers. In short: ladders = success = good, snakes = failures = bad.

The last time I preached on snakes and ladders I got several of the obligatory compliments; “Nice sermon, Vicar.” “I really appreciated your message.” “You really made me think today.” Etc etc etc. Then one person came through, and made this remark rather abruptly: “Thanks a lot, Father. You have ruined that game for me and my family forever.” And I never saw him again.

Someone once said, “If you throw a stone into a pack of dogs, the one that comes out yelping is likely the one that you hit.” To this day, I try to remember that when someone tells me they absolutely hated my sermon.

Today, I don’t want to preach about snakes and ladders. I don’t even want to offend anyone, though I can’t promise anything! I want to talk about another board game, and how it imitates life. If you play chess, you may take a nap; you are way too sophisticated and enlightened for what I am about to say. But if you play draughts, you will likely understand.

Draughts is a game about moving forward; advancing toward a goal. The way you get there — the way you succeed in draughts — is to conquer your opponent. Jump them and they no longer exist. Double-jump them and they disappear faster. I used to love draughts as a youth, though I hardly ever won. It is not that was too kind to win; I was, in fact, quite ruthless! So I must have been too dumb to win! Whatever the reason, I always seemed to lose at draughts. The game changes dramatically when one of the players reaches the opposite edge of the board. When we land on that far side, we say to our opponents, “King me!” They stack one of our conquered pieces on top of the piece that landed on that far side, and now we are king. Kings are to be feared, you know. We can go anywhere we want to go. We can do anything we want to do. Whoever is “kinged” first has power, and is likely to win the game of draughts.

Understand that, and you understand human nature, which says that power is everything and wealth is everything and winning is everything — in checkers — in life.

When Jesus stood before Pontius Pilate on that first Good Friday, he disagreed. When Pilate asked him for his credentials, Jesus could have called down legions of angels and walked out of palace without breaking a sweat. If Jesus had chosen to assert his authority as the Son of

God, he could have merely raised his voice and Pilate would have melted. He could have said, “King me!” and he would have won the day. But then there would have been no cross. There would have been no Easter and there would have been no forgiveness for our sins and reconciliation with God. So Jesus let Pilate interrogate him like a common criminal. This “most unusual king in human history” believed in love more than power, and that so baffled Pilate that he never recognized the king of the universe who stood directly in front of him. Don’t blame Pilate; blame Jesus. He modelled the belief that power is not everything. Wealth is not everything. Winning is not everything. At least not in his kingdom.

In 1980, President Jimmy Carter lost his bid for reelection to Ronald Reagan, and he returned home to Plains, Georgia, a broken man- the peanut farmer. Even fellow Democrats distanced themselves from this embarrassment of a president. Out of the limelight, he began to quietly work on issues that were important to him as a Christian. He gave time and energy to a struggling organization called Habitat for Humanity. He advocated for people of poverty. He continued to teach Sunday school each week at Church. I understand, that he still takes his turn mowing the church lawn, while his wife, cleans the church. He continues to be a voice that speaks for peace in a world that is bent on war.

In 2002, Jimmy Carter was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize. And when he was asked by author, Phillip Yancey, to reflect on his life as an engineer, a Naval officer, a successful farmer, a governor, and a president, which phase did he enjoy most? President Carter thought for a moment and then said, “Now.” How ironic, that Jimmy Carter was once considered a “loser” in this nation’s eyes, and now he is one of the most admired and respected people in the world. According to Yancey, “If someone held a contest for best ex-presidents, Jimmy Carter would win hands down.” It causes me to pause; if what we long for in this life is to be admired and respected and loved, why do we spend most of our time trying to be successful and powerful and feared? What does that have to do with Jesus, standing before Pilate, refusing to act like a king that the world would want to follow?

If the world is sane, then Jesus is mad as a hatter, and the Last Supper is the Mad Tea Party. The world says, “Mind your own business” and Jesus says, “There is no such thing as your own business.”

The world says, “Follow the wisest course and be a success” and Jesus says, “Follow me and be crucified.”

The world says, “Drive carefully — the life you save may be your own” and Jesus says, “Whoever would save his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it.”

The world says, “Law and order” and Jesus says “Love.” The world says, “Get” and Jesus says, “Give.”

In terms of the world’s sanity, Jesus is a mad as a coot, and anybody who thinks he can follow him without being a little crazy, too, is laboring less under the cross than under delusion. “We are fools for Christ’s sake,” the Apostle Paul says. “Ultimately the foolishness of God is wiser than the wisdom of men, the lunacy of Jesus is saner than the grim sanity of the world. Thanks be to God. Amen.