

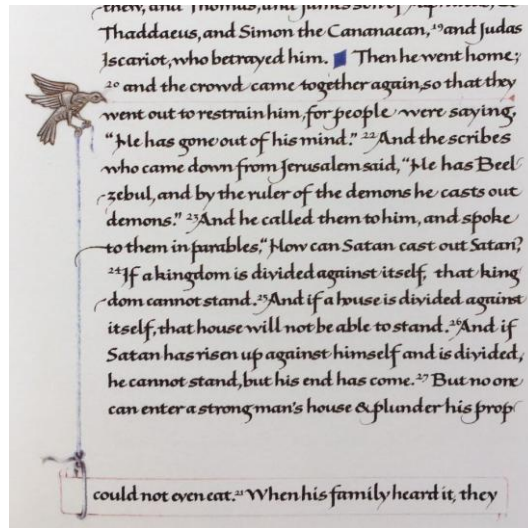


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# The Art of Gentle Reverence

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SOURCE: GOSPEL AND ACTS – THE SAINT JOHN'S BIBLE

I am sure that we have all heard that lovely, innocuous line, »Everyone makes mistakes«. The real question, however, is how we react when we discover that we were the ones who made the mistake. Often this is a time of recrimination, sometimes from others who blame or accuse us, but often enough from within, when we scold and castigate ourselves for the error we have made. It is one of the great art forms of the spiritual life to be able to deal with mistakes, our own and those of others, graciously. Unfortunately, it seems to be a dying art.

But not entirely. Lately I found a wonderful example of this gracious way of dealing with mistakes while researching the art and storytelling of the St. John's Bible, the first handwritten and hand illuminated bible in 500 years. The calligrapher working on Mark 3 had just completed the page on which the parable of the sower and the seed is recounted. To her great dismay, she realised that she had missed a line. However, this is not like a modern computer where »delete« and »insert« functions are a dime a dozen. Since the pages are parchment, each sheet hand made in a process that takes an entire day to complete, corrections are a major headache. If it just a matter of a wrong letter, it can be removed with a scalpel. But if an

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entire line is missing, then the entire page needs to be rewritten. Scraping an entire page clean often ruins the parchment. And one page of the Bible also took 7 to 10 hours to write. This was a major headache.

But the calligraphers and the illustrators found a lovely, lighthearted and humorous way to deal with the mistake. First the calligrapher wrote out the missing line at the bottom of the page, neatly framed by a banner. A rope was then drawn that was placed into the mouth of little bird, which has flown up to the place where the line is missing in the text. If you look carefully at the bird, its beak points to the place where the line of Scripture needs to be inserted.

When people view this page of the St. John's Bible, their reaction is instantaneous and universal: they laugh. It delights them to see how creatively the artists dealt with their mistakes. This occurs more than once in the text, with such creative ideas as a bee pulling a line of text up to the proper place with a series of pulleys, and a lemur using his tail to draw up a piece of forgotten text in another place.

This is the high art of living and working with our mistakes. Jesus was a master of it. The woman caught in the act of adultery is not given a long lecture, nor is she berated, brow beaten or humiliated. A simple »go, and sin no more« is sufficient. When Jesus realises that his own reaction to the Canaanite woman was too harsh, he does not beat his breast, but he admires her faith, loudly, publically and wholeheartedly. He knew the way of lovely, lighthearted and humorous correction, and it delighted people to see how he dealt with their mistakes, and his own.

Imagine how much more joyous and tender life would be if we were to recover this sacred art in our living and loving with God and one another. The Celtic Christians believed, that each day of our lives was like a blank sheet of parchment. What would happen if we treated our days like a sheet of that parchment, recognizing its value and rare preciousness? Then we would be unwilling to risk destroying the day by scraping an entire page clean because of a single mistake. Instead, we could treat the mistakes and oversights on the parchment of our lives with the same creativity and humor, insuring that the corrections we need to make do not have to destroy all that went before. And in the end, we would still be left with a day that is God's work of art.

That is what I call the art of gentle reverence. It is that wonderful, lighthearted and delightful skill of correcting a mistake by recognizing in the light of wisdom, that the days of our lives possess the rare and fragile beauty of handmade parchments. If we possess a gentle reverence for the fragile beauty of our lives, then we will correct the mistakes without doing serious damage to our lives. A high art form, indeed. Perhaps we could insure, that it will not becoming a dying art.

**Erik Riechers SAC**

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