

Bob Dylan's "Gonna change my way of thinking": Buddha's jewels or Jesus's? – an analysis by Kees de Graaf.

In 2003 Bob Dylan rewrote the lyrics of the "Slow Train Coming" track 'Gonna change my way of thinking' and recorded the alternate version together with Mavis Staples, for the album "Gotta Serve Somebody: The Gospel Songs of Bob Dylan". So far Dylan has performed the rewritten version 40 times in concert. This year alone, Dylan opened no less than 21 shows with this rewritten song. Most of these performances were done with so much passion, conviction and commitment in Dylan's voice, that it is worthwhile finding out what the reason might be for this new outbreak of mild evangelism. We'll have a go at it.

When compared to the 'Slow Train Coming' version the song was cast in a completely new arrangement, both lyrically and musically. One may say that the rewritten version of the song has lost much of the pugnacity and fighting spirit, the original version had plenty of. In the original version, written in 1979 shortly after Dylan's controversial conversion to Christianity and amidst all opposition which his conversion triggered off among the majority of his fans and in the media, Dylan was ready to make an antithetical and unequivocal statement about his newly found Christian faith. In the song he quoted Jesus from the Bible saying: "He, who is not for Me, is against me". When Dylan rewrote the song in 2003, about 23 years later, the development of his faith had gone through various new phases and he gained some new insights. Although the apocalyptic conceit remained, his faith and annex his world view had in some sort of a way become much more lenient and compliant and less combatant. In the alternate version he shows much more vulnerability and amidst the darkness of his earthly existence he ultimately finds comfort, and consolation in the experience and friendship of God. Let us now see how this works out in the song.

The first verse is basically the same as in the original version: "**Gonna change my way of thinking, make myself a different set of rules, gonna put my best foot forward, stop being influenced by fools**". I wouldn't be surprised if in this line Dylan was inspired by what the Bible says in Romans 12: 2 "Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that you may prove what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect". The meaning is clear. His conversion to Jesus completely changed his way of thinking and he adopted a new set of Biblical rules of which 'love' is the most important as it says in Romans 13:9, 10: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself, love does no wrong to a neighbor; love is the fulfilling of the law". "**Stop being influenced by fools**". The word "fools" sounds harsh in the new setting, but then again in those days (1978-1981) it was common language he quite often used in his songs: "Fools making laws" (No time to think), "That trainload of fools" (Senor), "Fools they make a mock of sin" (In the summertime), "Fools glorifying themselves" (Slow Train), "Nothing more than fools" (Lenny Bruce).

"I'm sitting' at the welcome table, I'm so hungry I could eat a horse". "Sitting at the welcome table" may be inspired by an African-American spiritual which says: *"I'm gonna sit at the welcome table. I gonna sit at the welcome table one of these days, Hallelujah! All God's children gonna sit together...one of these days."* This song refers to the metaphoric image of a large wedding party – the wedding party of the Lamb - which will be organized in Heaven, in hereafter. This eternal wedding feast, where all God's children will be welcomed at the welcome tables, is described in Revelation 19:7-9. Revelation 19:9 says: *"Blessed are those who are invited to the marriage supper of the Lamb"*. The poet longs with all his heart and soul to be present at that party, he hungers for that sweet day, when he will stand and sit beside his King. It is the reason why he says: ***"I'm so hungry, I could eat a horse."*** This expression is a so-called idiomatic hyperbolic. It means that you are very hungry. I suppose the word 'horse' originally ended up in this expression because the animal is well known, large, and seldom eaten. When you eat a horse you have huge quantities of food available to satisfy your appetite. Also, *hungry* and *horse* are alliterative-- that is a common characteristic of set phrases. To sum this up: the word 'hungry' should be understood here in a figurative sense and expresses the deep longing and hunger of the poet to be in the presence of God. Having a meal together – at the welcome tables - is in the Bible the deepest expression of love, friendship, alliance and companionship with Jesus.(Revelation 3:20).

"I'm gonna revitalize my thinking, I'm gonna let the law take its course". The prospect of sitting at the welcome tables one day, gives new life and vigor to the poet's way of thinking. Before we may understand What Dylan means when he next says "I'm gonna let the law takes it course" we first need to discuss what the 'golden rule' means. We'll do that below.

"Jesus is calling, He's coming back to gather up his jewels" In Mark 13:27 we read: *"And then He (Jesus) will send out the angels, and gather his elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of the heaven'.* These are – like Dylan wrote in "Ring them Bells" - 'the chosen few who will judge the many when the game is through'. However, the poet talks about his 'jewels' which will be gathered by Jesus when He returns. Dylan may use this word 'jewels' here in opposition to Buddhism. "The Three Jewels" are the three pillars that Buddhists take refuge in, and look forward for guidance, in the process known as 'taking refuge'. (The 'Three Jewels' are: 1. Buddha – The Enlightened or Awakened One- 2. "The Dharma" –the teachings of Buddha. 3. "The Sangha" – the community of those who have attained enlightenment).

It looks like as if the poet says: "Buddhists may take refuge in their 'Three jewels' but I believe in and I chose Jesus who will come back to gather *his* jewels". Jesus's jewels are his elect as described in Mark 13:27- see quotation above. He motivates his choice for Jesus by saying: ***"we're living by the golden rule, whoever got the gold rules"***. The Golden Rule or ethic of reciprocity basically says that 'one should treat others as one would like others to treat oneself'. We find this Golden Rule in the modern concept of human rights and in a wide range of world cultures and in all the major religions. Within the context of this song

Dylan no doubt refers to the Christian Golden Rule which we find in the Sermon of the Mount (Matthew 7: 12) where Jesus says *"So whatever you wish that men would do to you, do so to them; for this is the law and the prophets"*. We're in the heart here of the Christian faith as Jesus says in Matthew 22:36-40 where Jesus talks about the greatest commandment in the law: *"You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it, You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the law and the prophets"*. It is this commandment, this Golden Rule, the poet lives by and adheres to. It is the reason why he says: ***I'm gonna let the law takes its course***. If you love the Lord and your neighbor like yourself, you let the law take its ultimate course. You fulfill the law; you do the very thing the law was given for in the first place.

When Dylan goes on to say that ***"whoever got the gold rules"*** he makes a distinctive twist on the religious/moral definition of the Golden Rule. In business and politics there is an alternative definition of the Golden Rule which reads ***"He who has the gold makes the rules"***. It means that the party who has the greater resources (usually the most money) has the greater power (is the boss). When Dylan now says ***"whoever got the gold rules"*** he makes another twist on it and now applies this to Jesus. ***"Jesus is coming to gather his jewels"***, his jewelry, his precious stones, his gold. It is Jesus's gold and therefore because he has got all the gold he is the only one who is entitled to rule: ***"whoever got the gold rules"*** *"All power is given to Him in heaven and on earth"*.

"The sun is shining, ain't but one train on this track, I'm stepping out of the dark woods, I'm jumping on the monkey's back". "The sun is shining" may mean that the poet now has a bright future ahead of him. In some other cases (e.g. *"I still got the scars that the sun or "Son" did not heal – in "Not Dark Yet"- or "A ruckus in the alley and the sun or "Son" will be here soon" – "Thunder on the mountains"*) you may also read "Son" instead of "sun" but in this case I would think it a bit farfetched to read it like that. ***"Ain't but one train on this track"***, everything moves into the same direction, there is only one possible solution to reach your destination. Nobody can stop this train – which may be a slow train coming- but which is nevertheless bound for glory. *"All rails leading to the west"* Dylan wrote in an alternate version of "Ain't talking".

We earlier wrote that Rd. A.T. Bradford recently published a book called: *"Out of the Dark Woods – Dylan, Depression and Faith – (The Messages behind the Music of Bob Dylan.)"*. In 1986 Dylan had married his gospel back-up singer, Carolyn Dennis. She filed for divorce in 1990. According to Dr Bradford, the emotional trauma caused by the divorce triggered off in Dylan a severe reactive depression. In this book Dr Bradford says that the ***"monkey"*** referred to in this song is the monkey of reactive depression; the ***"dark woods"*** of which were responsible for his releasing only one original album between 1990 and 2001. If it is right what Dr Bradford says, then I think that the "dark woods" may represent the reactive depression Dr Bradford refers to. ***"I'm jumping on the monkey's back"***, however, may mean that the poet has recovered from his depression and now tries to get on with his life. And he does so by jumping on a monkey's back. Thanks to Mark Turnbull for bringing to my attention that ***"I'm jumping on the monkey's back"*** is a switch on the old addiction metaphor "A monkey on my back". Maybe Bob wants to make it clear that the reactive depression is no longer in control, he was able to get on with his life, the monkey is no longer on his back, he himself is now on the monkey's back. He has overcome his addiction (s) and depressions.

“I’m all dressed up, I’m going to the county dance, every day you got to pray for guidance, every day you got to give yourself a chance”. Dylan once wrote in “Things have changed”: *“I’m well dressed, waiting on the last train”* followed by *“Standing on the gallows with my head in a noose, any minute now I’m expecting all hell to break loose”*. When the apocalyptic fires are about to break loose, the poet more or less cleanses himself, and dresses up, ready to be welcomed at the eternal welcome tables, the party that is to come and the country dance that is to follow. In anticipation of this you have to fulfill your duty on earth, you have to walk the line, and to meet every day’s challenge, you need to pray for guidance from above to remain on track. You should not give up: tomorrow will be another day with new chances and challenges which you have to face. The poet concludes that: ***“Storms are on the ocean, storms on the mountain too, Oh Lord, you know I have no friend like you”*** Wherever the poet goes he is in for stormy weather, his life goes through deep valleys of pain and agony but he doesn’t mind the pain and the driving rain because he knows that the Lord is his only friend and He will lead him through the darkest hour of any circumstance. This is a song of great comfort and consolation.