

A New World

It's easy to think of John the Baptist as an eccentric oddball who is so far removed from us as to be untouchable, unrecognizable.

So we give him a feast day and make lovely icons of him, but heaven forbid we should actually touch him!

And yet today's gospel lesson urges us to do just that!

Touch him!

By stepping inside his prison cell.

A cell reserved for political prisoners.

He's not in the clink for religious reasons.

If you criticize King Herod, you're a traitor!

And so John the political prisoner sits alone, amidst the smells of human waste, rat urine and mold.

Overwhelming smells, as cold damp stones and rusty iron bars close in on him.

John is a political prisoner because he fearlessly points to the dream of a new world.

Not the world that we hope to enter when we close our eyes for the last time, but a world into which each newly born child might enter.

John points to a world in which common decency, the dignity of all, and mercy, become the water we drink and the air we breathe.

It's the world God always intended this world to be.

Where is John the Baptist today?

Perhaps we shall find him in Jimmy Lai, an activist who has courageously stood against mainland China's increasingly authoritarian grip on what was once a free Hong Kong.

Perhaps we shall find him in Mark Colville, a member of the Kings Bay Plowshares Nine group, whose members seek to end the existence of nuclear weapons — before nuclear weapons end our existence.

Perhaps we shall find him in the thousands of protesters in Myanmar, who, like Jimmy Lai and Mark Colville, like John the Baptist, are at this very moment locked up in dank prison cells — all of them political prisoners.

Seeing our faith, not through the eyes of pious sentimentality, but through the vision of a new world, provides a difficult wake up call to reexamine the very point and purpose of what we say we believe.

Because, it's so easy to miss the point of what our faith is all about.

It's so easy to bend the faith to look more like us, rather than bend ourselves to look more like the faith Jesus came to model for us.

To get a sense of what this might mean, let's eavesdrop for a moment on a conversation between the monk, Richard Rohr and the author Brian McLaren.

First, Fr. Rohr:

"At the beginning of Mark's Gospel, Mark announces that he is proclaiming the good news about Jesus Christ, the Messiah, the Son of God.

But in the first half of the Gospel, it's only the evil spirits who recognize him, and Jesus warns them to keep quiet.

When Peter and the Twelve finally recognize Jesus as the Messiah, Jesus again warns them not to tell anyone.

He tells them that the Messiah must suffer and die, but they don't understand.

When Jesus is arrested, they all run away.

In Mark's Gospel, it's not until the crucifixion that Jesus is recognized as the Son of God.

By a Roman soldier no less!

Why does Jesus keep his identity secret?

Is it because he doesn't yet fully understand it himself?

Perhaps more likely, he doesn't want to be accepted for the wrong reasons.

He wants to lead people into a way of love and suffering service to others.

He refuses to be dismissed as a mere magician or wonder worker.

All of this comes to a climax when Jesus puts the question directly to Peter and the other disciples: 'But who do YOU say that I am?'"

And here's Brian McLaren:

What if Jesus has a message that truly can change the world, but we're programmed to miss the point?

What if the core message of Jesus is unintentionally misunderstood?

Or intentionally distorted?

What if many who sincerely value some aspects of Jesus' message, miss or even suppress other, more important dimensions?

What if many carry on a religion that faithfully celebrates Jesus in ritual and art?

Teach about Jesus in sermons and books?

Sing about Jesus in songs and hymns?

And theorize about Jesus in seminaries and classrooms?

And yet, somewhere along the line, miss the rich and radical treasures hidden in the essential message of Jesus?

What if Jesus' secret message reveals a secret plan?

What if he didn't come to start a new religion?

What if he came to start a political, social, religious, artistic, economic, intellectual, cultural and spiritual revolution — that would give birth to a new world?

Today, Christ asks each of us, “Who do YOU say that I am?”

We each have to come to that moment of deciding who Christ/God/Ultimate Reality is — for us!

A simple intellectual acceptance of God doesn't do the trick.

Instead, we need to participate in God's active presence in our lives — amidst the power of unconditional love.” Rohr & McLaren, modified.

Doesn't this challenge lead us to view the world very differently than we are used to?

We are used to seeing the world divided into us and them, tribes and factions, insiders and outsiders, rich and poor, black and white, indigenous and invader, as the list goes on and on.

When we engage the world in this way, all we are left with is conflict.

Because each individual and group wants to come out on top.

Everything is a zero sum game, meaning, in order for me to win, you must lose.

But John the Baptist and Jesus and the prophets, both ancient and contemporary, and the mystics from every tradition around the world, invite us to see beyond the illusion of separation — and to engage creation as it truly is.

They invite us to gaze upon the true vision of our actual condition: a creation in which Everything is One.

I came across a book a few weeks ago that's been around for decades but, since I don't get out much, I've never heard of it before.

It's entitled The Tao of Physics.

Tao is the ancient Chinese form of mysticism.

Physics is the science that seeks to provide an explanation for all that is.

The author is a physicist who has also studied deeply the traditions of eastern mysticism.

And what he discovered is that this most fundamental of the sciences and the deepest forms of spirituality agree on the nature of reality: everything is interconnected.

Everything is One.

Our Christian faith teaches the very same thing, until so much of Christianity was hijacked by Greek philosophy.

I say hijacked because Greek philosophy separates everything.

The physical from the spiritual.

The good from the bad.

It is a dualistic view of the world.

But in its original form, Christianity has far more in common with eastern mysticism than with Greek philosophy.

Just take a gander at the gospel of John, listening in as Jesus murmurs that he and the Father are one.

That all people are one.

That all creation is one.

Why does this matter?

Perhaps because it defines how we engage with the world.

If the Greeks are right, then war and conflict and us against them is simply our fate on this planet.

It's the reason so many see religion as simply muddling through this life, waiting on the hope of heaven.

But if Jesus and John the Baptist and the mystics from every tradition are correct, then we are called to re-discover our common humanity.

Our unity with creation.

Indigenous people have known this forever.

It's the difference between a western mindset of "I have rights" and an indigenous mindset of "I have obligations."

Obligations to serve past, present, and future generations, and the planet herself." Stan Rushworth.

When we embrace our faith through the eyes of the prophets,
through the eyes of the mystics, through the eyes of native
peoples, suddenly, a whole new world opens before us.

Do we have the courage to walk inside?

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