

God With Us - A Sermon for Christmas Eve

I heard on the radio the other day that the Church of the Force, yes, the church based on the Star Wars Jedi Knight principals, is gaining about 1000 new members a week....

And certainly the world is full of folks who say that all religious traditions, even the church of the Force, are essentially the same.

And indeed, if you look at the core teachings of each religious faith, each has as a central teaching some variant of this: "do unto others as you would have them do unto you."

And that is a wonderful and profound sentiment, as far as it goes.

And yet, what this night is here to say is that what God gives to us in Jesus, is not religion at all; but in Jesus God begins the marvelous journey of joining together heaven and earth.

It was the philosopher who said:

"All manmade religion stands in opposition to the gospel.

Manmade religion is all about rising toward the eternal, perfect God.

The call is to go up and up and up, because manmade religion says that God is high above, we are down below, so it's up to us to fly on the wings of our own moral, spiritual, and religious efforts out of the corrupt earth and into the divine heights." Emil Brunner. (modified/paraphrased).

Manmade religion is about humanity rising to a perfect, unchanging, and very often, disinterested God.

What separates the message of Christ from all other religions, including what passes for Christianity today, is simply this: while religion is about humanity seeking God, authentic Christianity is all about a suffering, deeply caring, "next to us" God who is always and everywhere seeking us.

In the last presidential election there was a great dust up about who are the makers and who are the takers.

This was a distinction made largely by people who identify as Christians.

In standard religion, including what passes for Christianity in today's world, the sense is that we make our own destiny, that we are responsible for our own salvation, that we are indeed our own makers and the makers of our success.

Which of course allows us to look with contempt on those who aren't so qualified as we are; and to judge that they are themselves to blame for their difficulties; and that they can and should lift themselves by their own bootstraps.

But it also leads to a sense of inner anxiety, since deep within each of us is a sense of our own need for that which we cannot ourselves provide.

Which is why tonight, of all nights, is a time to remember once again who we are and who we are called to become.

It is a night, of all nights, to remember that "God's majesty is not in the realm of the eternal.

God is Immanuel, 'God with us,' and even more, he is 'one of us!'

The Word becomes flesh, and in the flesh of an itinerant prophet from a nowhere town on the far edge of a great civilization, God's glory is revealed.

Such glory, so small, so lacking in trumpets and gold, seems too much to handle.

As the Apostle John writes, he comes to his own, who neither recognize nor receive him.

No wonder we so happily exchange the mystery of the incarnation," for Santa Claus. Id. (modified/paraphrased).

We prefer tinsel and decorated shop windows to the utter astonishment that God really and truly comes to make her home among us: it is nothing more than nonsense to the rational crowd and a terrible threat to the religious crowd.

Because if the one who holds all things together becomes not only one of us, but comes as one of the lowest of us, well, what does that say to our pretensions for power, for wealth, for fame?

What does that say to our persistent need to ignore the destitute, the widow and the orphan?

"To know the incarnate God is to see ourselves as we really are: trapped in sin and encased in the lonely castles built of our own pride.

It means confessing our own complicity in the hells we find ourselves in and have made on earth.

And more than this, it means spending ourselves on behalf of the poor, those who exist at the margins of society, those at the end of their rope.

It means recognizing that before God, we are all takers, none are makers, and knowing this, perhaps our hearts can soften and our eyes open to all around us who are in need.

'Is this not what it means to know me,' says the Lord through the prophet, 'to defend the cause of the poor and the needy?' (Jer. 22:16).

Truth be told, the incarnation, from the manger to the cross, is the very opposite of our wishes.

It defies our logic and exposes our self-righteousness and bankruptcy.

It reveals how obsessed we are with ourselves.

And facing this image of ourselves, God coming among us can, at first blush, seem like very bad news indeed.

But then God meets us precisely where we are.

God meets us precisely in the empty, pain-filled, godforsaken places of our lives.

And God meets us precisely there precisely because Her aim is to defeat every hell, every pain, every godforsaken part of our lives, not through coercion or punishment, but through love, through compassion, asking only that we extend the same to each other.

Whoever and wherever we are, no matter what hell we find ourselves in, Jesus descends to us and invites us to descend with him.

And lo and behold, what we come to discover is that in our depths, the divine height is revealed.

+amen

