

The Word Incarnate

Like many of you, I have been following with some interest as Pope Francis tries to remind powerful folks in Rome that real power is found in service and gentleness and kindness.....that the power that comes from lording it over other people is as far as you can get from Jesus, as far as you can get from the gospel.

Privilege and rank, even the American version that prides itself on pulling yourself up by your own bootstraps, can be an insidious way of rejecting Jesus.

We Episcopalians, as a denomination, probably need to pay special attention to the tendency toward privilege and rank, since on the mainland, we're traditionally known as the Republican party at prayer, while in Hawaii, we are the only denomination invited by the Royal family to establish a church here.

The way privilege and rank come to undermine the gospel is by separating one's spiritual life from one's regular life, creating a highly private, individualized, spiritual connection, but one that is walled off, particularly from the least among us.

And truth be told, many folks who suffer from what Pope Francis calls spiritual schizophrenia, will look to the gospel of John as their justification for separating every day life from the spiritual life.

And at first blush it may seem like John's gospel indeed separates this life from the next, the holy from the ordinary, our life from God's life.

But as you who come here week in and week out have come to discover, St John, in his gospel, is in fact saying exactly the opposite.

It starts with the reading we have today.

"In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God."

By going back to the beginning, to the first book of the Bible, to Genesis, John shows us how Jesus began his relationship with us; not as a prophet emerging from the desert as St. Mark tells it, not even as a new born child in the manger, as Luke and Matthew say, but as the very Word of the eternal God, that which through whom all things are created.

Meaning, that in Jesus, who is born to us, who eats with us, laughs with us, endures sun and rain with us, who buys and sells, experiences illness and joy, and yes, who dies as well; in Jesus, it is in the most ordinary events of our lives, in our joys and

pains, in our disappointments and struggles, in the daily effort to face another day; in these things of life, the holy, the sublime, the very Spirit of God, is most present and most real.

In his gospel, St. John takes us back to the beginning, recognizing that we long ago broke what was perfect — but rather than coming to instantly fix our problem; Jesus comes to accompany us along the long, winding road of slowly but surely putting things right.

Jesus invites us, just as Adam is invited, in the beginning, to become companions of God, and through this marvelous companionship, to learn how to live lives of compassion and prayer and friendship with each other — for it is only through the eyes of each other that we can gaze into the eyes of God.

Maybe this is what the incarnation means.

Dissolving the separation between the Word and the flesh.

Erasing the barrier between the sacred and the secular.

Creating the intersection between God's space and our space.

This truth came home to roost with me just the other day as I read this story shared by one of my seminary classmates.

He writes:

"When I reflect on the circumstances of Jesus' birth I think of an Aymara family I knew in the altiplano of southern Peru.

One of the adobe walled, thatch-roofed homes I regularly passed by contained a young couple with a baby boy who was just beginning to walk.

The couple always smiled at me when I passed so I often stopped to tell them how cute their baby was.....

I always chuckled to see how fascinated he was with me (the tall gringo) and yet, how shy he was at the same time.

As the weeks passed I saw the family fairly regularly and I watched the toddler grow into a little boy.

One day, it came time for me to go down to Lima on altitude leave.

This meant that I would be away from the community in which I lived for a month.

The day after I returned to the altiplano I went out in the early morning to buy fresh bread.

I was looking forward to greeting my young friends and their baby boy.

When I passed their home I saw the mother and she smiled at me but I did not see her baby.

When I began talking to her, the husband walked out and told me that while I was away their young son had died.

I was devastated.

When I asked what they had done after their baby died, they said they had buried him on top of a small hill near their home so that he could be closer to heaven.

I asked if they wanted me to bless the grave.

They were very anxious for me to do that since the boy had been buried without any formal religious service, and after the service I asked the boy's father how he and his wife were doing.

He said that he and his wife were sad at the death of their child but he was confident that the boy's death would be good for the family and the community.

I was a little taken aback by what the father said so I asked him to explain what he meant.

He said that they were confident that the boy was with God — AND — because the boy's body was buried in the community, the boy's life would pass into the earth and into the potatoes and quinoa they were growing for food.

Incredibly, the father said that when his family ate that food, the life of the little boy would be giving them life!

What a lesson on the incarnation I received that day.

A baby comes into the world, teaches us how to live and then dies in order that we might live." P. Kavanaugh.

The Word became flesh and lived among us...

It happened then.

It's still happening today.

And that, dear friends, is where real power may be found.

+amen.