

## To Bethlehem

Perhaps you saw the picture this week.

The young man dressed in a black suit and tie, left hand raised with a finger pointing to the sky, right hand lowered, holding the pistol that shot and killed the Russian Ambassador only moments before, the body sprawled on the floor of a museum in Turkey...

It's a scene that repeats itself from the dawn of human history, when the first brothers, Cain and Abel, become the first murderer and the first victim of murder.

The Turkish assassin reportedly yelled out Allah Akbar! God is Great! just before committing this murder..... and yet we ought not feel any sense of superiority, for we too need only remember the murder and mayhem we have wrought in the name of God, country and apple pie.....

Using God to justify violence is a stark reminder of how, down through the ages, we who call ourselves "human" have projected our love of violence onto the character of God, and thereby justify our love affair with violence, with revenge, with death...

It is a stark reminder that the great error of humanity is our firmly held belief that we are in fact human.

We are not....!

"We are instead only partly human, only brokenly human.

Yes, we see glimpses of our humanness, yet we can only dream of what a more human existence, a more human political order, might look like.

We have not yet become truly human....

In truth, only God is human, and yet thankfully, because we are made in God's image – we are **capable** of becoming human." (Walter Wink, Just Jesus, p. 102) paraphrased.

And it is this hope, for the **capacity** to become human, that brings us together tonight, because in truth the whole creation is groaning, just like the pains of childbirth – right up to the present moment.

That we are still on the way to becoming human is announced in every headline, from this week's assassination to drone killings to the racism and anger that infects all of our lives – we are on the way, but we are not yet home.

And yet, we come to this night and discover that God delights in us..... even in our imperfection.

Even when we are cowards, even when we are murderers and liars who are addicted to death, even when we are slaves to security – even then – God is determined to fashion us into something far greater than we can ever imagine." James Allison, paraphrased.

Fr. Vince Donovan lived among the Masai people in Tanzania for many years.

They are a cattle raising people who wander with their herds hundreds of miles each year.

They worship their ancestors and nature, and believe that this life is the only life; we live for a time, then perish forever.

One Christmas night, as they sit warming themselves around a blazing fire under a star lit sky, Fr. Vince says this to his Masai friends:

"Human beings are **not** just like a fire sputtering for a few minutes, then fizzling out, with only darkness before and after.

Humanity is **not** the plaything of the universe, **not** a thing to be teased with happiness and crushed with sorrow.....

Humanity is God appearing in the universe, right in the midst of all he creates, and this changes the meaning of the universe!

The Masai reply, perhaps like many of you, shaking their heads and saying, 'No, people are not God!

Human beings, they fight, kill, destroy, they do everything to separate themselves from one another.'

'But Fr. Vince responds: You have not **yet known** a human being, you have never **seen** an actual human being, because creation, ..... it's not yet finished!

What you see is creation groaning, yearning to be complete, to be the body of God.

But suppose that the fullness of time arrives and by the work of God there **is** a man who is, at long last, actually, fully, perfectly human....if there is such a man, then, what else can we say, except: this man is God – God appearing in the universe?!

Jesus is that man!

And what he shows us, through his life, given over to service and love and surrender, is not only who **God** is, but who **humanity** is too." V. Donovan, Christianity Rediscovered, 57. (paraphrased).

And that's what brings us here tonight, to remember, or perhaps to learn again for the first time, the nature of your true identity...

Whether you show up here always or never, whether your faith is deep or non-existent, the one thing that connects all of us to one another is our true identity: that you are a child of God.

And even more, you are a beloved child of God.

Beloved by the child that God himself becomes.

Beloved by the God who knows every form of human difficulty, who promises NOT to rescue us from danger, but to be with us in the midst of every danger.

This holy night, as we celebrate God becoming one of us, remember this: you are made in the image of God.

"And realize that if you could see with the eyes of the soul, you'd see angels hollering: "Make way for the image of God! Make way for the image of God!, marching before every person we pass.... Long, Testimony, 46.

Even me, even you.....

This night, in all of our incompleteness, in all of our struggles, God says to the whole world, from the Masai herdsman to that gunman in Turkey:

"You are accepted.

You are accepted by that which is greater than you, the name of which you do not know.

Don't ask for the name now; perhaps you will find it later.

Don't try to do anything now; perhaps later you will do much.

Don't seek for anything; don't intend anything.

Simply accept the fact that you are accepted." Tillich.

In this child, through the grace of God, all of humanity is home free.

The groaning of creation will one day find its new birth, "a magnificent, yet delicate project, worked out over the vast expanse of time, revealing, not the power of one who insists on cleaning up everyone's act, but the greater power of one who patiently and compassionately and gently loves us into being; this gracious God for whom time doesn't matter." James Allison. paraphrased.

God doesn't come to punish, or frighten, or scold.

Instead, God comes to tell us, all of us, even you, even me, that we are deeply, truly, and forever loved.

Merry Christmas....!

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