

Journey to the Cross: (2) "The New VISIBILITY" -- a sermon by Gary R. Hindman. Scripture: John 1:14-18.

*Text: "And the Word became flesh and lived among us...full of grace and truth."
--John 1:14, NRSV*

Christ makes the invisible love of God visible! That's what is unique about Christianity. Just think about it! Almighty God, Creator and Sustainer of the Universe is made known to us as a loving Friend through the person of Jesus Christ. This "new visibility" has been expressed in a variety of ways in the Scriptures but the one we will look at today comes from John's Gospel: "And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us." The Lord God of the Heavenly Hosts, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the God of Moses and the prophets, the God of the Old and New Testaments, the One of whom it was said no one had ever seen the face of God—this One became visible in Jesus of Nazareth. "He dwelt among us, and we beheld his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father."

When John wrote that, he parted company with everyone who had ever thought about God. "That the Word actually became flesh" was an entirely new thing to the Greco-Roman world of John's day. Years later Saint Augustine would say that in his pre-Christian days he had read and studied the great pagan philosophers and that he had learned many things, but none of them ever expressed the belief that the Word could or would become flesh. It was an absurd thought to the Greek way of thinking because the body was thought to be a sort-of prison-house in which the soul is shackled, a tomb in which the human spirit is confined. So why would any God want to imprison himself by the limits of physical form?

The Greeks do have a point. It must have been a great step down for God to become a human. Only a God of great humility, only a God of great compassion, only a God with a tremendous mission of love and mercy and forgiveness would consent to do such a thing! Paul expresses this sentiment in his letter to the Philippians by saying: "Though he was in the form of God, Christ Jesus did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men."

To know Christ is to see what God is like. God loves and cherishes the world and its people the way Christ loved and cherished its people. But if a great artist could perfectly paint the face of Christ among the people, surely in that face would be lines of sorrow as well as joy, concern as well as a deep confidence. For sure, there is much in humankind to celebrate; but there is also much that is worthy of concern. In this Season of Lent, as we "journey to the cross," we need to reexamine the gift of Jesus Christ and what he makes possible in the life of faith.

FIRST, THERE IS A NEW REALITY IN CHRIST. Before Christ the people of Israel

worked from two dimensions: a past from which to draw and a future in which to hope. But Jesus made the reality of God's reign alive in the present. Everyone who encountered him became aware of this new reality.

After his "Sermon on the Mount" people were saying: "He taught (us) as one who has authority, and not as the scribes." (Matthew 7:29) He didn't have to present credentials; his words and deeds were clearly of God. Once he said, "The words that I say unto you I speak not from myself but the Father abiding in me does the works." (John 14:10)

God is revealed in the humanity of Jesus. Our own Presbyterian "Confession of '67" states it well: "In Jesus of Nazareth true humanity was realized once for all....He lived among his own people and shared their needs, temptations, joys and sorrows (and) expressed the love of God in word and deed."

His ministry began with a series of temptations in which he struggled with the same problems that confront us all: short cuts to fame and fortune; the lure of material success over doing what is right; and popular acclaim in exchange for uncompromising his loyalty and devotion to God the Father. Returning to the "Confession of '67" it says that "his complete obedience led him into conflict with his people. His life and teaching judged their goodness, religious aspirations and national hopes. Many rejected him and demanded his death. In giving himself freely for them he took upon himself the judgment under which all (of us) stand convicted."

In the end he was abandoned on a Cross. He was put to death by the very people he came to save. His prayer from the cross still haunts us: "Why hast thou forsaken me?" Have you ever been there? Have you ever felt forsaken and utterly alone? It's a lonely time--the walk through the valley of the shadow, that narrow path of the People of the Cross. But there is also glory in it, if we suffer for right causes, if through our suffering we gain wisdom, if through our suffering we become enablers to help others in their suffering. If that happens, then there is purpose even in pain and agony.

On a cosmic scale, this is what happened in Jesus. His suffering for our sakes broke the old cycle of sin and death and supplanted it with the power of repentance, forgiveness, and a new, right-relationship with God. His message in a word was this: "God loves you unconditionally and has already paid the price for your redemption." This new reality meant, in turn...and this is the second point, that (2) THERE IS A NEW QUALITY OF LIFE IN CHRIST. "We have beheld his glory...and from his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace." (John 1:14b,16)

Jesus teaches and demonstrates the new quality of life by bringing us a new kind of ever-present, unconditional, giving love which is called by the Greek New Testament word 'agape'. By comparing 'agape' love with typical human love you will see the qualitative difference.

- God's love is unconditional; human love often has strings attached to it.
- God's love is free for the asking; ordinary human love has to be earned.

- God's love is inclusive; human love is narrow and exclusive.
- God's love is steadfast, and unending; human love is fickle and vacillates.
- God's love endures rejection; human love often ceases when unreturned.

Christ was human as well as divine. And so we not only encounter God's love, we see what it would be like in a human expression. God in human form came to us. The Old Adam, unworthy of paradise, was found and embraced by the "New Adam". We were found, found by a love that unfolds to us the meaning of our existence. In a vast, impersonal universe, we have been discovered. We are known by an intimate and personal God. I know this because I know that God is like Jesus and Jesus was this way.

When Jesus "set his face to go to Jerusalem" to suffer and die for our sakes, it was God who was going to Jerusalem; when Jesus was scourged and crucified for our sakes, it was God who suffered; and when he was raised from the dead as a sure sign of victory over sin and death, it is God who was glorified. The love of God in Christ flows to the very heart and center of the universe and overcomes sin, evil and death and because it happened to one who was fully human as well as fully divine, I find it both meaningful and life-changing.

THERE IS A NEW REALITY IN CHRIST.
THERE IS A NEW QUALITY OF LIFE IN CHRIST.

Therefore, we, as people of the cross, (3) ARE WITNESSES TO THE NEW REALITY. Our vocation is to be like Jesus and make visible the invisible love of God. We do this by the choices we make and the values we cultivate. Paul said, "I live; and yet, no longer I but Christ lives in me." (Galatians 2:20) I used to fear that giving your life to Christ meant the end of one's individuality and identity; quite the contrary, to live for God and with God is to be on the very path of greatest satisfaction. Who, after all, knows better how we should live than the God who created us?

John speaks of this presence of God in Christ as a "fullness" and describes it as "grace upon grace." This peculiar phrase might best be understood by someone who has entered upon the study of some subject that has an inexhaustible nature--like the mastery of a musical instrument or a poetic or artistic form. The better you get the more beautiful it becomes. To the great artist there are always new vistas, new challenges, and new dimensions to explore as you approach the ideal. And so it is with the Christian life. The more you know of him the more wonderful he becomes; the deeper we get into our faith, the more meaningful it is to our life, until we can say with the great Apostle: "For me to live is Christ, and to die is gain." (Phil 1:21)

The New Visibility is about you and me learning to love as he loved, learning to care as he cared, learning to trust as he trusted, and learning to give as he gave. He is visible, he is incarnate, wherever and whenever his followers catch the vision and share the joy of his steadfast, overflowing love. We are, to use Elton Trueblood's phrase, "the fellowship of verification." In other words, the Church and the Believers, even with all

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our foibles and imperfections, are the living testimony of God's love in the world.

We carry a cross during this Season of Lent. But in a far deeper sense, we are constantly called to bear the cross of Christ. It is not a matter of producing the cross in your purse or pocket. It is, rather, giving the cross a new visibility by your own example. We ordinary people have an extraordinary mission: to be someone special and significant to others in the vast, hurting world. We are called to be love where we live.

Neither the cross nor the Christ hold meaning unless they reappear in flesh and blood--in your flesh and blood and mine! And when we love like Christ loves, he lives on in new and beautiful ways and we become part of the greatest story ever told--"that the Word became flesh and dwells among us and we behold his glory...as of the only Son from the Father."

LET US PRAY: Help me to get inside this wonderful message, to tell the story of faith in how I live and love others in the name of Jesus, amen.