

God With a Human Face

From the series for Eastertide: Credo

Text: John 14:18-20; II Corinthians 4:6

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Transcription of the spoken sermon

"I am coming to you... because I live, you too will live; then you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me and I in you." John 14:18-20

"For the same God who said, 'Out of darkness let light shine,' has caused his light to shine within us, to give the light of revelation - the revelation of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ" II Corinthians 4:6

Every Sunday is Easter Sunday and this Sunday in Eastertide reminds us again that Sunday is always a little Easter and the celebration of the Resurrection of Jesus Christ. The Lord is risen. The Lord is risen indeed.

The hallmark of the Christian faith is "Alleluia." It is Doxology. It is praise. And the mark of a Christian is the posture of worship. It is the spontaneous eruption that comes from the realization that in the end it is not Darkness but Light. It is not sadness but joy. It is not death but life. And so we celebrate on this Sunday in Eastertide the Resurrection of our Lord, his exaltation, and his presence with us in power, in the spirit.

Our Lord, in whose face we have seen into the heart of God, our Lord Jesus Christ, who has given to us in his very embodiment a clue as to the nature of God so that Christian faith is faith that God is like Jesus, and that what we see in Jesus is a true reflection of what is in God. In Jesus we do not see all of God, for God is incomprehensible, a mystery beyond our ability even to faintly conceptualize or get our arms or minds around. No, Jesus is not all of God, but what we see in Jesus is true of God. God is like Jesus, and Jesus tells us that God has a human face.

Paul said we've seen the light of the revelation of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. John's witness was "If you've seen me, you've seen the Father." John's testimony to Jesus in the gospel, the fourth gospel, is the most elevated conception of Jesus Christ that we have in the New Testament.

Last week I pointed out to you the simplicity of that very understanding. This Jesus whom you crucified, God raised up and has made Lord and Christ. That was probably the very early groping for expression of what had happened in this one, Jesus Christ. But within the New Testament itself there was development. There were different perspectives. The scripture is a very diverse and multifaceted witness to God so that we have in John not the kind of primitive simplicity of that statement in Acts: "This Jesus whom you crucified, God raised up and has made Lord and Christ."

In John we have the word made flesh, dwelling among us. Now, as I said last week, no one would ever have thought in that first century to affirm Jesus was fully human. They knew that. They knew that as well as I know you're human and you know I'm human. They didn't have to confess that. But John even with his exalted Christology also is very clear. The word became flesh, human, and dwells among us. Jesus is seen as fully human in John who also gives us the most exalted understanding of Jesus Christ.

So often we take paragraphs and isolate them out of their context so I went back and I began to look at the broader context of John's gospel. I saw that in the thirteenth chapter, where the passion story begins, we have Jesus acting out the servanthood role, washing the feet of his disciples. And then he starts to become distressed and concerned and he dismisses Judas. Remember he dismisses Judas. Judas goes out. And then John says, very significantly, "and it was night." Now John wasn't making a statement about the time of day. He was making a statement about the state of the cosmos. It was night. It was dark. It was black. The old conspiracy, the plot is coming now to its culmination, and as Judas leaves that inner band, John says, writing his story, "It was night." And then there's a little deal about Jesus going away and Peter saying, "I want to go with you." And Jesus saying, "You can't." And then we come to that marvelous fourteenth chapter about, "Let not your hearts be troubled. You believe in God, believe also in me," and so forth, and, "I'm going to prepare a place for you," and, "You know the way." Thomas says, "We don't know where you're going. How can we know the way?" which is the setup for this classic statement, so familiar, so oft quoted in our Christian understanding, "I am the way. I am the truth. I am the light. No one comes to the Father but by me." And then Philip's dullness, "Just show us the Father," leads to the statement, "If you've seen me, you've seen the father."

John couldn't say it any more boldly, with any more exalted conception than that. Jesus: Way, Truth, Life, in a kind of exclusive way, "No one comes to the Father but by me. If you have seen me, you have seen the Father." I and you, you and me, we and the Father, this kind of Christ mysticism.

There is an indwelling of God in Jesus, and an indwelling of Jesus in us, and us in God and Jesus. And the Easter promise: "Because I live you too shall live. I in you, you in me, we in God." That's John's stuff.

In the Gospel of John you have it clearly stated that Jesus was human, and with equal clarity and power that God was in that human person. To meet Jesus was to meet God. To hear Jesus was to hear God. To follow Jesus was to follow God's way. Jesus was the embodiment of the eternal God, and in Jesus the eternal God is revealed, or is unveiled, or is laid bare, if you will. There is the embodiment of God. And seeing this one, John says, is seeing God. He says earlier this God is personal, is full of love, is full of grace, with an intention to save the world, having loved the world. All of that he weaves into his gospel. He says, "This God is reached by way of Jesus and in no other way." What you have is *John's* witness that we have access to God through Jesus.

Sometimes I want to water John down. One of the temptations when you're in my business is to try to get around letting somebody say what they really want to say. Sometimes I'd like to water John down a little bit because, though I think that he made a magnificent witness to the revelation of God in Jesus, I think that in his exuberance he claims an exclusivity with which I'd want to argue.

The Jesus of John is a Jesus you have to love. And the God that you see in that Jesus is a God that you love, a God you can trust, and that you would want to follow. Jesus said, "I am the way, the truth, and the light. No one comes to the Father but by me." I can understand that, I can affirm that. Jesus was the Way. You want God, you want this conception of God as personal, as Father, as caring parent, then Jesus is the Way to such a God. Jesus, in his life and in his teaching is true. He is the truth, and he is the life. He came to give us life, and he offers us life, and in the emulation of his life there is life, and it is in this Way, and in this Truth, and in *this* life that I come into relationship with God, the God I see in Jesus. That's the God I want. That's the God I love and the God I want to serve and follow.

Now why do I like that God? Well, maybe I've just been brainwashed, you know, warped from the womb. It's true. So what? That's God for me, the God I see in Jesus, this God full of grace, this God who is represented in the Father, in the story of the prodigal son, this God who reaches out, who embraces, this God, who's personal, this God who is full of grace, that's the God I see in Jesus. That's the God I want. Maybe it is God's spirit in me that makes me want that. It's not the fact that I want it therefore I create it. I have experienced that God through Jesus Christ in the community of Jesus' people, in the Christian Church, in the Christian tradition.

I have come to understand a God who is love, a God who is a depth and an abyss of mercy, a God full of compassion. That's God. I want to serve that God. I want to worship that God. I call you and invite you to join me in the praise and worship, in the service of that God.

John can't say too much. John cannot lift that God represented in Jesus too high for me. The only thing I realize is that, in a context of that first century where the Jesus movement was necessarily trying to gain a separate identity, developing an

over-againstness, that if I read John's gospel and am not sensitive to that context I could become an anti-Semite. I could get caught up with anti-Semitism because the Jews don't come off very well in John's gospel.

Now we can understand that. If you want to have a good, honest, authentic, understanding of Martin Luther, don't go the archives in the Vatican. And if you want to have a fair evaluation of the Pope in the sixteenth century, at the time of the Reformation, don't read the writings of Luther. You get my point?

The gospels do not give us a balanced, unbiased, fair portrait of first century Judaism, of Pharisaism. If I'm not sensitive in my reading of John's gospel, I could get a very negative feeling. It has caused that over the centuries. The Christian church simply has to acknowledge that we have a horrid record of anti-Semitism. We have called the Jews God crucifiers, God killers. There has been a terrible record because there has not been a sensitivity to see that what was happening there was a natural sort of over-againstness, adversarial spirit. So must I read it with some sensitivity.

Now I live in a world that is no longer separated by mountain ranges and by continents and oceans. I live in a world now that is like the size of a grapefruit where there is instant communication. I live in a world now where there are world religions of which mine is one. And now I say, "Could I water John down a little bit so that we could level things off a little bit and make some room for somebody else?" No, that's not the way to do it.

Let me hear John. And when I hear John I say, "Go for it John." That's exactly my experience. That's my Jesus, and that's the God I see in Jesus. The only thing I'm going to argue with you about, John, is if you meant "no one comes to the Father except by me" in an exclusivistic sense as though anybody that didn't come in this avenue of Jesus was lost in darkness forever. Then I'm going to argue with you. I'm not going to take that from you, John. I'm going to say that, in the exuberance of that context in the first century with all of your conviction that Jesus was the final word, the last word, the full revelation, the authentic revelation, you claimed exclusivity too.

You kicked off a movement that has become a worldwide magnificent movement, with this downside: its exclusivism had not made room for the authentic spiritual experience of others. It has not given room to the freedom of God, the possibility of reaching a world other than through the channels of the institutional Christian church. It has been a source of arrogance, of self-righteousness, of superiority, and it is time the Christian church simply faced up to that.

Now hear me again. John doesn't say anything that I do not affirm. John doesn't tell me anything about Jesus that does not cause me to say "Alleluia." He doesn't show me anything about God in the face of Jesus that does not cause me to bow down, and to worship, and to adore. But why do I have to go beyond that and say

not only this is true, but it's the only thing that's true? Why do I have to say this gives me joy, and at the same time deny the source of someone else's joy?

No I'm not going to water down John. I'm going to hear him. I'm going to hear that testimony and I'm going to say, Yes, that's the way I see it too, in terms of that Way, that Life, that Truth. Ah, yes, that can draw from me worship and adoration. That deserves my life, my soul, my all. Then I'm going to enter into dialogue and into relationships bearing my testimony, pointing to the God that my Jesus points to.

Someone has said that our forebears sent missionaries into the world because they could not conceive of how men could die without Christ. I would say we would send missionaries into all the world because if we really got the story and the message, we would not be able to conceive of how people could live without Christ.

It is not a matter of a secret door into heaven; it is the possibility of a fully human existence. It is the possibility of life in all of the richness that was embodied in Jesus, who lived totally committed to the eternal God, creator of heaven and earth, lover of the world. This God brought just this, tangibly.

If you go into an Eastern Orthodox congregation you'll find them praying, and kneeling, genuflecting before an icon painted in gold and all different colors. I was raised to think that was some kind of idolatry. Well frankly that's not right. That *icon*, if you were raised in an Eastern Orthodox condition, if you were a good Greek, that icon becomes a focus that points beyond itself. It is a way of spirituality.

If you were raised in the Roman Catholic Church there are certain rituals, certain sacramental acts, statuary, the whole Marian development, Maryology. All that is nothing more than our human need to have something that we can get hold of that can move us, through itself, to the invisible God, the incomprehensible One.

I suppose that's why we've been so heavy on this book because, again, we needed something that can rein in our thoughts, and focus us, and give us a picture, something tangible. My God has a human face. He's like Jesus. I love God, and I'll serve God to my dying breath. I'll not water down John's gospel pronouncement. But I'll reserve the right to disagree, to believe that God is all John says—and maybe even more.