

The Human Face of God

From the Eastertide series: Credo

Text: John 1:18; Colossians 1:19

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Transcription of the spoken sermon

The only explanation for the existence of the Christian Church, the Christian religious tradition, is the conviction that the one who was crucified lives. It didn't happen all at once, but gradually. Those who were intimately connected with Jesus were convinced that he was alive still and they experienced his ongoing presence.

Jesus was a Jew. Those who followed him were Jews. The earliest Jesus movement was Jewish. The thing that eventually caused the break off and the formation of a new, of another, religious tradition was the resurrection of Jesus Christ. The conviction that this one, who had embodied God in their estimation, this one in whose face they had seen the heart of God, this one of whom they spoke in terms of incarnation – they were convinced, ultimately, that such a life, that such a human existence could not simply be violently ended, entombed and forgotten. And so, eventually, out of that conviction about Easter, about the ongoing presence of Jesus in the Spirit, the Christian community was formed.

They gave witness to that in various ways and we have those in the New Testament. We have Paul, for example, the earliest written witness to the ongoing life of Jesus through his visionary experience. Luke tells us that delightful story about the two on the road to Emmaus who were joined by a third whom they did not recognize until, as their host at table, he broke bread and their eyes were opened, they saw him. Luke goes on in the next paragraph to add that, discussing those things on Easter eve, suddenly Jesus was in the midst of them and they were terrified and afraid. He said, "Please, just give me something to eat and calm down." There were various ways in which that reality was witnessed to. There is a great diversity. But, through it all, there is this conviction that the crucified lived and was present with them still, in conversation, in community, in the breaking of bread.

It took a long time before that Jesus movement became a Christian movement and gave itself a clear, creedal definition. Before it did that, it had moved from that environment, that context of Israel into the culture and the language of the

Greek world, the empire. When eventually that faith was carefully defined and refined as it found expression, for example, in the Nicene Creed, 325 CE, and the creed from Chalcedon, 451 CE, what came to creedal expression was reflective of the biblical statements, but more so. John had said, "In the beginning was the word," or the divine intention, and that intention became enfleshed, took on human form in our midst, and no one has ever seen God, but this one reflected God as a son reflects a father. In the Letter to the Colossians written by Paul, perhaps, or a Pauline school, there is that claim that in Jesus all of the fullness of God dwells bodily.

The creeds, Nicene and Chalcedon, did not say a lot more than that, but they said that philosophically. They said that very clearly, and the picture was that there was one who came from another realm into our realm, embodying in human form God from another realm, from outside, who, after doing his work, returned to that other realm, so that we live, as it were, in an alien realm. Not only are we alienated, but we are in a natural realm which is not the realm of the Spirit, God existing outside of this order.

One of the great Church fathers, Bishop of Alexandria, Athanasius, who carried on a furious controversy over the natures of Christ, affirming the deity of Christ, put it this way: Jesus became human, or God became human that we humans might become divine. God became human that we humans might become divine.

With all due respect to this great bishop of the Church, let me suggest another angle. What if God became human in order that we might become human? What if to be human is divine? What if this Jesus around which all this centers, what if this Jesus did not come in from the outside, but emerged in the process? What if this process of billions of years eventuated in a creature that began to be human, that began to be conscious until, in the fullness of time at the right time, there was this one Jesus upon whom they looked and said, "My God ! That's it!" What if the incarnation which we point to in Jesus did not really hinge on Jesus, but on the human? What if the revelation was that God is in the human? What if to be human is to be divine?

You young people on your way - what if what God is really about for you is not to make you divine, not to make you some bloodless, blameless, flawless paragon of divinity, but flesh and blood human beings? This preposterous statement in the first chapter of Colossians, that all of the fullness of the Godhead was crammed into him bodily, what does that mean? Doesn't it mean that humanity is a container for divinity? And wouldn't it be possible if what God is about for us is not to make us divine, but to make us human, not to rescue us from this natural order, but to make us at home in this natural order? To be human.

Oh, we are not human, you know. Now and again we are human, humane. Now and again we glimpse it. We have moments, but for the most part, the old animal nature takes over, that long clawing out of the jungle. Just put me in a corner, just raise my fear level and my humanity is drained away in a moment. I wonder if the

divine intent in the revelation in Jesus was not to say to us God is calling us to be human, and to be human - would that not be divine?

Now, it may sound a little convoluted, but I am on to something. Do you hear me? Might not the divine intention for us be, not that we become divine as the old Church father contended, but rather that we become human? Ah, if we can become human we could revel in a spring day like this, we could take in the blossoms, we could listen to the cantata of the birds, we could look into the face of a child, we could touch each other with love and melt. That is to be human.

On a larger scale, I was thinking this week, there was a proposal that our defenses ought to be altered and, of course, our defenses will need to be altered in a different kind of a world, a world no longer determined by the Cold War when the East and the West had certain kinds of defenses; and the administration is saying that that has to be updated, and certainly that is a valid point. But, as I listened to the discussion about this missile defense system from outer space, the claim is that the technology really isn't there yet. And then, some of my cynicism arose a bit and I thought, "But, it will be good for the defense industry."

Then I had another thought. It's a silly thought. It gives witness to my impossible naiveté, but I thought, because I am thinking about God's intention for us to be human, what if this great nation of ours with all of its resources and all of its power should go to these rogue nations? Now that the whole game is changed around and we don't have this impasse of East and West, we have these rogue nations here and there that could well launch a missile. What if we went to them with all of our power and all of our resources and said to them, "What is it that you really need? What is it that you really desire? What is it about us that is so offensive? And what could we do to help you realize your dreams?"

Ah, now you know I have entered senility. But, I think about it and I think why wouldn't that be worth a try? I know there are evil people in the world, a Saddam Hussein, a Gaddafi, the Taliban, I know that. But, what makes people ugly? What brings out the worst in people? And are not those, our "enemies," demonized in our minds? What would happen?

I was thinking, we change our defense system now, we aim at these rogue nations, we find a way to keep the world at bay, we find a way to keep our thumb on the world. But, what would happen if we, with all of our power and all of our strength, should try to create a different kind of feel in the world? What if we really went and said to people, "Tell us your dreams and let us see if we can help you realize them." The billions of dollars that we will be using to put a missile defense system in place over the next decade just possibly could be invested in human community that might not necessitate a new defense system. Now, that is really stupid: But, I wonder if the call of God is not to become divine, but to become human. And if we could become human, would that not be divine, for in him all of the fullness of the Godhead dwelt bodily, and why not in you? Take bread and cup as a sign of your solidarity with the one who calls you not to be

blameless and flawless, but to be real, to be human. That would cause one to cry,
"My God!"