

The Face and the Flesh

From the series: The Human Face of God

Text: John 6:51, II Corinthians 4:6

Richard A. Rhem
Christ Community Church
Spring Lake, Michigan
March 12, 2000

Transcription of the spoken sermon

It is Lent again. If you have been with me over the years, you know that Lent is a very difficult season for me for preaching. It is when I contemplate the meaning of this season that I realize how costly and difficult it is to be a Christian - if not impossible.

It is in Lent that I am faced with the fact that Jesus took up the cause of the poor and the oppressed, representing in his life and message the underdog in a world of imperial power and economic crisis. He envisioned and embodied an egalitarian world marked by justice, fairness and compassion. And we who hear his word today are the powerful and the affluent for whom his mission and message is a threat.

One Lenten season I kept hammering away on the theme, "He died the way he died because he lived the way he lived," and I still believe that to be the case. As Dom Crossan reminded us a year ago on the first Sunday in Lent, the bread and the cup mean the separation of body and blood and that points to violent death; Jesus did not die in bed of natural causes.

Neither did Gandhi or Martin Luther King or Archbishop Romero or thousands of others whose names we know not, but who stood in solidarity with the marginalized masses - the powerless and voiceless ones.

And so, here we are again at this uncomfortable moment of the Christian calendar and what will we do with it?

I have a good friend who says often to me as we speak of the human situation, the world events, the social scene, "Save your own soul." His advice is not intended as a counsel of withdrawal from the world, of narcissistic self-absorption, or disengagement from life. But, he means, I think, that one needs to be centered in oneself with a bit of detachment from which to understand oneself, the human condition, and the Spirit that is ever seeking to break through and become embodied in the human, in one's own life and in the life of the world.

Lent is a season for that - a time to think, to seek to understand, "Who am I? What is my life? To what vision and values am I committed?"

Lent is a time to cultivate awareness - to become aware in moments of reflection. "What am I doing? Why am I doing it?" In a word, to face what truth I'm living, or whose truth I'm living.

This is easier to recommend than to accomplish because we are constantly bombarded with propaganda that would shape us and mold our actions and attitudes.

I've noticed a television ad recently during the evening news. It advocates trade with China, which has become a sharp political issue. I'm not even aware of the motivation of all the players, those who want to trade and those who do not. But, I was struck by how this ad debases those who are against granting the most favored nation status to China. According to the ad, they are Isolationists. So, write your congress persons; tell them to vote for trade with China. If you catch the small print on the screen that appears momentarily, the ad is sponsored by the Business Round Table. Of course, the Business Round Table wants trade with China and they can make a good case for such trade being the best assurance of peaceful co-existence with the world's most populace and future most powerful nation. But, simply to write off those who oppose trade with China as Isolationists is to fail to recognize that there are some who are opposed because of human rights violations, who want to tie trade with movement toward a more democratic society.

I am not saying anything about the issue itself - trade with China. I am only using this as an illustration of the twisted nature of the messages that pommel our minds and battle for our attention.

Having just gone through the Primary battles, we have only begun to experience the distorted rhetoric of an election year - The object is not to carry on civil and humane dialogue; it is to get elected - and I find it all very disheartening.

What to do - not disengagement, flight, cynicism or despair. But, let me suggest that it is wise and well to save one's own soul, cultivate a bit of detachment and then from a state of awareness engage where one can for the vision and values one holds. What I am suggesting for our Lenten journey is that we cultivate the intentional life - *that we determine to live with intentionality*, and not just any intentionality, but an intentionality shaped by the way, the life, the truth of Jesus.

Old hat, you say. Admittedly so. Yet, still compelling and radical.

Translation will be necessary; one cannot don a bathrobe and sandals and flee to Galilee's hills. It is here one must determine how Jesus' way can be embodied by the likes of us. We will not all settle on the same mode of incarnating the way of Jesus in our world of 2000, marked by power, affluence, politics and global

community. But, we can be about seeking to understand our world and what the implications are of following the way of Jesus.

That is my hope for our Lenten experience. At the beginning, let me say a word about the theme - The human face of God. I get the phrase from Paul who claimed that God, the Creator, who is the source and ground of all being (Paul's language - The God who said "Let light shine out of darkness") has given us knowledge of the Mystery of God in the face of Jesus Christ. It was Paul's claim, it is the claim of the Christian faith that in the face of Jesus we get a clue to the nature of God.

For the Jew, God is found in the *Torah*.

Or the Muslim, Allah is revealed in the *Quran*, and so forth. I do not claim that God can be found only in Jesus, but I do claim, as a Christian, that God is revealed in the face of Jesus. In this Lenten journey, quite unremarkably, we will seek to understand ourselves in the Presence of God, of ultimate Truth and Reality, and our window to God is the face of Jesus.

I could have created this meditation all out of the Gospel of John. Let me visit four moments in that Gospel. It begins with God's intention. That is how I would translate the Greek word *logos*, translated commonly as "word."

1:1 In the beginning was the Intention.

1:14 The Intention became flesh (human).

6:51 My flesh I give for the life of the world.

20:21 As the Father has sent me, so send I you.

In the face of Jesus we see God - God has intention. The intention became embodied in the human. The intention embodied in this world is crucified, but cannot finally be killed. You are now the embodiment of the intention. Do you follow me? This, I think, is what at least John's Gospel was saying.

What was the eternal intention of the Mystery we call God was, after billions of years of cosmic evolving embodied in the human - in our faith tradition, the human, Jesus of Nazareth. The Divine Intention that came to expression in Jesus of Nazareth was killed by the power arrangements of the world. But, what came to expression in that one's flesh cannot finally be killed; it is now embodied in his Body, that is, in you.

That means that God's intention for the world is now in the human and the world will only ever realize God's intention if we manage to realize that intention in our lives and in world community.

God will not intervene to rescue us. God is not pacing the floor somewhere beyond our world now and again dipping into the chaos of our human reality to fix things, nor is God awaiting the time to intervene and bring the whole drama to a close as was the apocalyptic hope of many in the time of Jesus and many still today.

The Divine Intention has been expressed in the human and its full realization awaits the transformation of human consciousness.

I cannot make that happen, nor can you. But, as I become aware of the cosmic drama, the emerging wonder of the natural world, the dawning of consciousness and the human story, I can at least begin to understand what is going on, aware of that process of billions of years and limitless space which has spawned the human which can be understood as the incarnation of the Divine Intention.

Contemplating the human face of Jesus, I see the meaning of the human as the image of God and I know the fullest, richest realization of my humanity is to express the Divine image, to embody the Divine Intention. When I see that I am saved, my soul is saved, I know who I am and that for which I want to live. I won't be bullied by political rhetoric or seduced by Madison Avenue or deceived by special interests. I will live out of my own center with detachment, awareness, doing what I can when and where I can to make the world safe for children and a place where the elderly can live with dignity and die in peace.

I see it all in the Face which reflects the Divine Intention which has become flesh offered up for the life of the world.

There were some who heard the claim and turned away. Jesus said to his disciples, "Do you also wish to go away?" Peter answered, "Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life."

Indeed.

That is why I take bread and cup in a ritual action in community. I thereby seek the presence of the Spirit through whom the Divine Intention was made flesh and I stand in solidarity with him offering my flesh for the life of the world.