

Blessed Are the Present

John 1:29-42

The next day he saw Jesus coming toward him and declared, “Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world! This is he of whom I said, ‘After me comes a man who ranks ahead of me because he was before me.’ I myself did not know him; but I came baptizing with water for this reason, that he might be revealed to Israel.” And John testified, “I saw the Spirit descending from heaven like a dove, and it remained on him. I myself did not know him, but the one who sent me to baptize with water said to me, ‘He on whom you see the Spirit descend and remain is the one who baptizes with the Holy Spirit.’ And I myself have seen and have testified that this is the Son of God.” The next day John again was standing with two of his disciples, and as he watched Jesus walk by, he exclaimed, “Look, here is the Lamb of God!” The two disciples heard him say this, and they followed Jesus. When Jesus turned and saw them following, he said to them, “What are you looking for?” They said to him, “Rabbi” (which translated means Teacher), “where are you staying?” He said to them, “Come and see.” They came and saw where he was staying, and they remained with him that day. It was about four o’clock in the afternoon. One of the two who heard John speak and followed him was Andrew, Simon Peter’s brother. He first found his brother Simon and said to him, “We have found the Messiah” (which is translated Anointed). He brought Simon to Jesus, who looked at him and said, “You are Simon son of John. You are to be called Cephas” (which is translated Peter).

One of my favorite expressions comes from the novelist Saul Bellow. In *Humbolt's Gift*, the protagonist frequently says, "Blessed are the present, for they are here and not absent." I find that expression oddly reassuring at times, especially when I'm not sure why I was asked to be at a certain place at a certain time. My daughter's graduation, for example, when the crush of thousands made me wonder if my attendance at the event meant anything at all to anyone. Or at a faculty meeting when one colleague after another blathers on and on saying nothing, nothing at all. It's at times like this that I invoke Saul Bellow: "Blessed are the present."

Today's Gospel points to the importance of presence. John has already told us about Jesus, the word made flesh, the light in the darkness. But once again, the initial focus is on John the Baptist. Again and again, the Jewish authorities press John the Baptist about whether he is the messiah that so many are talking about. Again and again, John the Baptist demurs, insisting that he is only the precursor of the one who is to come.

John the Baptist also recounts that when he baptized Jesus in the Jordan River, the Holy Spirit descended like a dove, providing further evidence that Jesus was the chosen one, the one who had come to take away the sin of the world. Jesus, the Son of God, is here, John the Baptist is saying, he is present among us. Emmanuel, one of the names that the prophet Isaiah uses to refer to the messiah, means "God with us." God is here in human form.

Blessed are the present.

That, I think, is the real meaning of the incarnation, the doctrine that, in Jesus, God deigned to become human. I have no doubt that God, the Almighty, was fully capable of working out the drama of redemption by other means – by some kind of cosmic remote control, I suppose – a means that might not have entailed sending Jesus to earth. But God chose to take on human form, to live as one of us, in the form of Jesus.

John seems to want to emphasize that point. When Jesus encounters two followers in today's reading, they ask, "Where are you staying?" Jesus shows them. It's as though John wants us to understand the humanity of Jesus. The Son of God, like the rest of us, needs a place to sleep at night. And perhaps that's why all of the Gospel writers talk about eating so frequently. Jesus sits down to eat with his disciples or at Martha and Mary's home. Or he experiences the pangs of hunger while fasting in the desert. What could be more human, what could better emphasize the humanity of Jesus, than hunger?

Blessed are the present. God with us in the form of Jesus.

Look at what the presence of Jesus means to Andrew and then to Peter – and finally to all of history. Andrew, Simon Peter's brother, encounters Jesus, and he decides to follow him. Then he runs off to find his brother and announces, "We have found the Messiah." Imagine Andrew's excitement. He's here, right here in Palestine! The one we've been waiting for, the one the prophets and John the Baptist foretold is right here among us. No more waiting. Come see him and touch him.

I've long believed that if we take seriously the doctrine of the incarnation, that God assumed human form, it changes radically our approach to others. The incarnation blurs the distinction between human and divine. If we can see Jesus in other human beings, it makes it more difficult to vilify others or to hate them. Hate comes more easily in the abstract, I think, or by category: Muslims or gays or immigrants or liberals. But if we take seriously the doctrine of the incarnation, if we sit down with those we suppose are enemies or if we share a meal together, it's much more difficult to hate.

I wonder whether the gunman in Tucson a week ago would have pulled the trigger if he had paused long enough to see Jesus in the eyes of his victims. Perhaps so. Perhaps he was so enraged – or deranged – that he was utterly blinded by the possibility of discerning the divine in someone else. But I have to believe that if he had been able to see the humanity of his victims, to

sit down to dinner or coffee and share in their humanity, that the tragedy might not have unfolded as it did.

The incarnation, God in human form, teaches us to look for evidence of the divine in others.

What Andrew could not have seen, what Peter could not have imagined, is how completely the presence of Jesus would alter their lives, not to mention all of human history. And what is the consequence of the coming of Jesus? John the Baptist declares it at the beginning of the reading: “Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!” And *world* here, in the Greek, is *cosmos*. Everyone, all of creation, is redeemed by the coming – by the presence – of Jesus!

That’s the meaning, the beauty, of the incarnation. Jesus, Son of God, came to earth, to be present with us – to live and breathe and eat and sleep like we do, to blur the line between humanity and divinity. And all of history has been altered by his presence.

Blessed, indeed, is the One who is present.

Second Sunday after the Epiphany

January 16, 2011

Christ Church

Middle Haddam, Connecticut