

Advent Midweek Vespers – 2022
The Incarnation and the Kingdom of God ~ It is Humble
1 Peter 5:1-11
Luke 1:39-56

The book of Colossians contains this priceless line: “He (Jesus) is the image of the invisible God” (Colossians 1:15a). Philip wasn’t so sure. Philip wanted more. “Philip said to him, ‘Lord, show us the Father, and it is enough for us’” (John 14:8). I get the feeling that Philip wanted a display from Jesus that matched his preconceived notions of God. I get the feeling that Philip wanted a dazzling theophany, lights and sound and an experience of triumph that might invade his soul and reinforce his notions of divinity and provide a basis for trust, a basis for faith. It wasn’t the first time. Moses pleaded to God for the same thing. “Please show me your glory” (Exodus 33:18). God does not want to be known that way. God will not reveal Himself to you that way. “My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, declares the Lord. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts that your thoughts” (Isaiah 55:8-9).

The most that Moses was allowed to glimpse was the trailing edge of the back of God’s glory (Exodus 33:19-23). God put Moses in a cleft in the rock and then all His glory passed by Moses but God covered Moses with His hand until the Almighty had gone completely by. Only then did God remove His hand from covering Moses and Moses beheld God’s back, but, as God said: “my face shall not be seen.” The full expression of God’s glory is *not* what He will give us. But He does give us His face. He does give us Christ. For many, that face is not enough. “He had no form or majesty that we should look at him, and no beauty that we should desire him” (Isaiah 53:2).

Do you think that you understand humility? I suspect that every single one of you would say that humility is a virtue. Can you say *why* humility is a virtue? The easy way out is to say that it is the opposite of pride, arrogance, vanity and that is true but it is simplistic. God’s holiness cannot be described as an absence of sin. Light isn’t, at its core, the absence of darkness. Life cannot be described properly as the absence of death. Holiness and Light and Life and Humility have a dynamic that is entirely their own.

Jesus was a bit mystified, saddened by Philip’s request. Jesus thought that Philip should have known Him pretty well by now. I have to admit, I would not have wanted to hear firsthand what Jesus said to Philip, I wouldn’t want to be told that I’ve missed the point on something so central. “Jesus said to him, ‘Have I been with you so long and you still do not know me, Philip? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, ‘Show us the Father’? Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me?’” (John 14:9-10). Have you ever made a pretty bone-headed mistake? Have you ever missed the point on something important right when it happened and only upon reflection down the road do you realize how spiritually blind you have been? Jesus had just washed the disciples’ feet, Philip’s feet. God washed Philip’s feet and Philip wanted more. I have made that mistake. Count on it; you have made that mistake. Do you know why we make that mistake, over and over? Because we truly don’t understand humility.

Here's how my massive Webster's Encyclopedic Unabridged Dictionary of the English Language defines humility: "the quality or condition of being humble; modest sense of one's own importance." Okay, so that just leads us to look up humble. "Not proud or arrogant; modest; having a feeling of insignificance, inferiority, subservience; low in rank, importance, position." Now that I've defined the word, do you think that you *understand* humility? You all have been around me long enough to know that I can be an odd duck, right? Here's an example. Every now and then I think what it would be like to have some famous person as a house guest. "I wonder what Oprah Winfrey would think to herself as she used our shower. What would Paul McCartney or Emmanuel Macron think to themselves as they sat at our kitchen table?" I think that 1566 Campus Ave. is a charming home but it's hardly the "Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous." It's all speculation, of course, I don't know what those folks are like on the inside but I suspect that they would find our home to be beneath them. Humility doesn't run rampant in the veins of humanity. We don't understand it.

By me reading the definition of the word humility in the dictionary, do you think that you have had your life enriched this evening? Humility is something we understand by experience. No better experience can be had than immersing oneself in Christ. He came to our home. Not a domicile, a womb. God, the creator of heaven and earth, lowered Himself into the womb of the Virgin. A zygote is the smallest form of a human, a fertilized egg. Conceived by the Holy Spirit, not by a human father, the Son of God came into our home in the humblest manner, our manner, and He made Mary's humble womb His throne. That womb became a throne not because it was so majestic but because it held Him who is eternal majesty. He was comfortable there, at ease there. Mary's womb was not beneath Him. Humility is not something that God strives for; it is His essential quality. He manifested Himself humbly because that is precisely what He is. Mary was the perfect mother. Bethlehem was the perfect city. A manger was the perfect place for the infant King to lay His head. He comes to us humbly, in the most humanly unimpressive way. But He comes joyfully, to share His life, to share His humility. His life and His humility are beautifully connected.

Do you think that God would contrive a pseudo-revelation of His person, fooling all of us by such an ingenious nativity and then adopt a more power-driven approach to humanity after His death and resurrection? The Kingdom of God came flooding into the world as Jesus is conceived, as the Son of God reveals His sacred face in Bethlehem. As parents and shepherds and later wisemen and Simeon and Anna and others draw near to Him they have their ideas about God turned upside-down. Peter said that Jesus should never wash his feet, that simply is not something that the Messiah should do, to demean Himself by washing His disciples' feet. Peter was immersed in Jesus' humility for at least three years and at the end of Christ's life dear Peter was still mesmerized by the world's ideas of God. What are those ideas? The poor are to serve the rich, the first shall be first, the strong are greater than the weak, the wealthy have more rights, more justice, more of God's favor than the common folk. Is that what you believe?

It is impossible to look at a pierced and suffering Savior and hold to that noxious approach to life. That's what we are to be immersed in – Jesus' death. It comes to us through the rags of the Scriptures. The Word of God does not wear a tuxedo and a Rolex watch – it is common, like your kitchen table. The Word of God has imbedded within it the humility of Almighty God. The Word speaks of Christ's manger and translates it into an altar where the Lamb of God was

crucified. Humility sings the most sublime of songs and it penetrates your heart, divides bone and marrow, and you become acquainted with Christ as He truly is. Bread and wine, the real presence of Christ's body and blood, the humble marks of Christ's kingdom, that is what opens your eyes to genuine majesty, what Moses saw when God removed His hand. It is a great sin to see your fellow man as being beneath you. It is a great sin to see service rendered to the least as being beneath you. The Lord Christ loves our kitchen tables, He gladly inhabits the humblest of homes, and He serves the least of us with earnest love.

I don't really go for the dictionary's definition of humility. If I were to rewrite the book there would simply be a picture of the crucifixion by the word and a single phrase: Here is where the greatest became the least. That is the humility that has invaded this broken world, the humility that has invaded your soul. That humility defines the Kingdom of God.