

THOUGHTS ON THE MYSTERY OF GOD

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Another priest and good friend of mine posted the following quote on his facebook page. Yes us church geeks really do use facebook to discuss our sermons.

Alan Giles from his book *Always Open, Being Anglican Today*:

"When faced with the impenetrable mystery of God, the instinct of the Eastern Church is to bow down and worship; the instinct of the church in the West is to reach for a microscope and attempt to analyze what is going on. "

There has been many a sermon that has gone in just the direction of the Western church. We really do get hung up on explaining everything. The big problem is that at some point we just can't explain in terms our brains can understand something as big as God, Christ, and the Holy Spirit.

A great shock to us poor seminarians was when our theology professor would look at us and say, Sorry, but there is just no way to really explain this. It is a mystery and we can only make feeble human attempts to explain things like the Trinity or how Jesus' death on the cross saves us. Someday we will understand, but not in this reality.

The expectation that we, as the learned clergy, can explain to all of you, the members in a single sermon something as complex as the Trinity is why most clergy hate Trinity Sunday. In fact in many parishes it is the least senior priest or better yet the seminarian who is asked to preach today.

We can ponder the mystery of the trinity and all the intricate images of the relationship with Father Son and Holy Ghost for centuries, but so what? The quote I began with talked about responding by worship or by analysis. Maybe the focus of today should be on how we respond when confronted with the Holy.

We have two people today to contrast in their response to an encounter with mystery, or the holy in Isaiah and Nicodemus.

Nicodemus is first of all somebody important. He is a Pharisee and the fact that he is named tells us how important he is. Think how few Pharisees are actually named in scripture. We know that he is probably afraid to be seen visiting Jesus for he comes at night. This is also metaphor for the Pharisees walking in darkness.

Imagine a stage presentation of this scene. Jesus stands alone in a spotlight. Nicodemus comes from off stage into the light to ask his question. Jesus answers him, but that

Nicodemus is still confused is quickly evident. About half way through Jesus turns from Nicodemus and begins to address a larger audience. The word you becomes second person plural, “y’all” in other words. These others would have been people in the room or maybe as in classic Greek drama, he addresses us, the audience.

When Jesus turns to the audience or the gathered disciples, what happens to Nicodemus? Does he go back into the darkness? Does he stay and continue to listen? We do not really know. He does speak up at the trial, but has little impact on the outcome. The next we hear is that after the crucifixion he brings herbs to the tomb for anointing Christ’s body. So what happened in the time in between this scene and the crucifixion and after. Once Jesus is buried, his name disappears from the Bible.

In his address to us, Jesus speaks of how many in the world responded to their encounter with him. The Message translation makes this very clear.

John 3:19 ¶ “This is the crisis we’re in: God-light streamed into the world, but men and women everywhere ran for the darkness. They went for the darkness because they were not really interested in pleasing God.

So in this passage it seems that Nicodemus just sort of hung around at the edges, in the wings of the stage if you will. Many if not most others ran back into the darkness deaf to the call to respond. Today many people run back into the darkness for they are not interested in pleasing God. They are interested in pleasing themselves. Some consider themselves good Christians, others turn their back on religion in general. Some because we cannot explain in provable detail what we believe. Because we cannot explain it to them, they decide God doesn’t exist.

Contrast all of this with Isaiah.

To be honest Isaiah has this powerful vision. Listen to the description of the vision. Now I suppose it would be much easier to respond “here am I send me,” if you have this kind of vision rather than speaking face to face with what appears to be a human in the dark of night. On the other hand the job that Isaiah is given would scare the daylights out of most of us.

Now I know that life in Isaiah’s time as a prophet was challenging and difficult. However his reaction to his contact with the holy compels him to go and do the work he was given to do. He had the option and chose the road of prophet. A difficult and challenging role.

We are now at the point of so what does this mean for us.

In EfM Education for Ministry we spend lots of time studying the Bible, theology and church history. However without time for theological reflections the whole exercise would just be mental gymnastics. EfM encourages us to spend at least half of our weekly class time on TRs, theological reflections. This is a process to examine the intersection of theology and life. Theology in this case is a verb, an action. The most important part of the whole

exercise is for the individual class member to come up with insights, belief statements and then implications for actions. Implications ask the question, as a result of this TR what is God calling me to do. Without these types of questions and the actions that they imply, theology is a lifeless mental exercise

At the end of the EfM program year the final common lesson is always about call to ministry. As a group we look at our gifts, what we have learned and ask what does God want us to do with what we have discovered this year. How does my study of the mysteries of the Bible impact my life and my ministry.

To broaden this out, the point of church is to bring us into contact with mystery, with the other, with the holy. However we are not allowed to just sit there in that moment. We are called to not just sit there, but to do something. Church is about both the don't just do something sit there, we call that prayer and the don't just sit there do something, that's mission. We are constantly called by God, to go out into the world to be the hands and feet of God. The beauty of this type of discernment of gifts and call is that our ministry reflects that which we hold most deeply. Ministry in this sense is not work, but joy. Ministry is not done out of a sense of obligation, but as a joyful response to the mystery that is God. This is ministry that feeds us, sustains us and brings us joy.

The Trinity is all about explaining how God works in our theological system, but God does not do the work on earth, we do. Theresa of Avila understood this many years ago. As one of the great mystics of the church she spent hours in prayer, meditation and contemplation, but she also knew the answer to the so what question. Her response, is one that you have all heard, but I suspect you did not know who wrote this hundreds of years ago. So I close with a short prayer/poem by Theresa.

Christ has no body now on earth but yours,
no hands but yours,
no feet but yours,
Yours are the eyes through which is to look out
Christ's compassion to the world;
Yours are the feet with which he is to go about
doing good;
Yours are the hands with which he is to bless men now.