

Homily – The Christ in All of Us

Rob Keim

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Here at St. Barnabas we have a many-paged bulletin that we use in our worship services. All of the readings and music are in the bulletin and we use a format or layout with a sidebar. The sidebar allows us to provide additional comments and instruction. I am not big on retelling the day's four Scripture readings in my sermon, so the sidebar often has comments about the readings so that you have a bit more background on those parts of the Bible. And, often the sidebar has instructions that explain why we do some of our rituals in worship. Many of you come from other denominations, and the sidebar allows you to learn why we do certain things as Episcopalians. And, the sidebar also allows us to share information about the music.

Today, in the sidebar on page eight we have provided some additional background on the hymn we just sang, "O little town of Bethlehem." In 1865, the year the Civil War ended and President Lincoln was assassinated, themes of peace and quiet would probably have been welcome to Americans. In that year, the Rev. Phillips Brooks took a trip to Israel and saw Bethlehem and its surrounding fields on Christmas Eve, which eventually inspired him to write this Christmas hymn. In contrast to some other Christmas hymns that emphasize the glory of God as seen in the grand chorus of angels, Brooks focused on the quietness of Christ's birth, and how little the larger world paid attention. The final stanza is a prayer that Christ would come and be present with us. That is a prayer that we still have today, "Christ be present with us." And, I am happy to reassure you that it is a prayer that has been answer over and over again with a resounding "yes." For you see Christ is not just present in the Jesus of two thousand years ago. With every breath that we take, Christ is present with each and every one of us. Christ is in all and around all, which means we live in a universe that is permeated by Christ and the eternal love of God. We live in a benevolent world. Sadly, many have lost this truth so it is something I want to remind you about today. God, and by extension the universe, loves you.

The spiritual writer, Father Richard Rohr, point out that there are three worldviews about that goodness of the universe, worldviews that are the foundation of our religious or belief systems. And these three worldviews are (1) the universe is against us, (2) the universe is for us, or (3) the universe is neutral.

The last one, the universe is neutral, says that reality is indifferent. There is no God against us or for us. Instead, we are basically on our own in the universe. Many good and even religious people subscribe to this worldview. Life has sadly convinced them that there probably is a God, and God might even be just and good, but this God is not actively involved in our lives or history. We can go through all the rites and services,

follow all the rules, but if the grace of God hasn't deeply touched us—which is the full meaning of conversion—we will have no meaningful awareness of the divine.

This is the malaise of much of today's Western Christianity. Many people keep up the external observance of reliance upon God, but underneath depend only on themselves. "Nothing's going to happen unless I make it happen," such people say to themselves. There is no active trust in the presence or the reality of God, or that God makes any real difference. This form of secularism is insidious because we can't get at it. All the right words and ideas are there, but there is a foundational sense of an indifferent universe and an uncaring, distant God.

If someone stays in an indifferent universe for long, they usually move to a second worldview where reality is perceived as hostile, destructive, or judgmental. Not only is God not involved but God has to be appeased. For such people God is somehow actively *against* humanity: watching us, judging us, critiquing us, and certainly not on our side. Many Christians claim they don't believe in this type of God, but it's clear that they do from the fearful way they live.

The third worldview can only be given by grace, though it has a great head start when we have been blessed with a loving and merciful family of origin. In this last group the universe is not against us, nor is it sitting out there indifferent. Somehow, it's on our side! Reality can be trusted. We don't need to pull all the right strings or push all the right buttons. Grace is everywhere. In this third worldview God Almighty is acting in our present world of pain, suffering and struggle. Life is perhaps difficult, but it is still good and trustworthy at the core.

Until we meet and know a benevolent God and a benevolent universe, until we realize that the foundation of all is love, we will not be at home in this world. That meeting of God, that understanding experience, cannot be communicated by words. It is a gift given through encounter with the Holy Spirit. Its inherent character is best described by three overlapping characteristics: faith, hope, and love. When we experience those virtues, allow them to transform us, and are able to pass them on to others, we are participating in the very life of God. And this is my invitation to you today. When you know that God is good then you start seeing God all around you. Christ is in all and around all.

Now, Christianity is the only religion that believes God became a body, became a human being, Jesus. That's why we get so excited about Christmas. We call it the feast of the incarnation or en-fleshment. Before the begin of time and space, Christ was the first emanation from God. And, with the Big Bang Christ is across all of time and space as the perfect union of spirit and matter. This was the first incarnation of Christ and we are reminded of the goodness of this first incarnation in the creation

stories of Genesis. Then two thousand years ago, perhaps when humanity was finally ready for it, Christ came into the world as the perfect union of human and divine that we know of as Jesus.

And, what Jesus allows us to imagine, because we see it in him, is that the divine and the human are forever joined as one. Jesus is both human and divine, and he is the window into the reality that God has created for us as well. God did not just take on a single, isolated human nature. Somehow through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus we are shown that the union of matter and spirit, the combining of human and divine is within our nature as well. We are to embrace this gift we have from Jesus as our birthright. This is the full meaning of the incarnation. To allow such a momentous truth, to fully believe it, to enjoy it in practical ways, to suffer it with and for others, this is what it means to be a Christian. You and I are simultaneously children of heaven and children of earth, divine and human, coexisting in a well-hidden disguise. We are a living paradox, just as Jesus was.

Most Christians were simply never told the truth, but this is the good news we celebrate with the birth of Jesus. Our good and benevolent God has created a good and benevolent universe in which the flesh and spirit, the divine and human, coexist. This is what we celebrate with Christmas. This is what we celebrate every time we get together to worship God. And, this is we celebrate as we go back out into the world. God is good, the universe is good, and like Jesus we have good hardwired into us as well. Merry Christmas!