

Sunday, March 8th, 2020, Lent 2A

Readings: Genesis 12:1-4a, Psalm 121, Romans 4:1-5, 13-17, John 3:1-17

Seeing through Two Eyes, Not One

Introduction

We have recently passed through the seasons of Christmas and Epiphany. Christmas and Epiphany are events of hope, events which point us to a God who becomes human, so that we humans may become divine. In Christian theology the reasoning is this: through Jesus, the God-man, the chasm between heaven and earth is breached, and we humans are afforded the capacity to move beyond our dismal brokenness (sinfulness – *harmartia*), to become integrated people, capable of building a new world. This idea, the idea of God becoming human so that we may become divine, is the heart, the essence of the Gospel: in doctrinal terms we call it *theiosis*.

Now, this conviction – of God’s humaneness and humans’ godness – is of course utopian in its aesthetic, but it is precisely this spirit of utopianism that provides the energy, the where-with-all to envision a new reality beyond the old one. It was this utopianism of *theiosos* – that even Africans were made in the image of God – that drove the Christian campaign against slavery which was a hallmark of 16th, 17th, 18th and 19th century free-market capitalism; it was this utopianism of *theiosis* – that all people should enjoy the benefits of good health and education, that stimulated Christian cooperation in the building of the welfare state after World War II. In my experience, it is this utopianism of *theiosis*, that inspired the liberation theology movement in Latin America, Africa and beyond during the 1970s through to the 1990s, of which I was a small part. God becomes human so that we may become divine, God becomes human, so that we may dream dreams, not only *dream* dreams, but live them, bring dreams to fruition. This is exciting, this is breathtaking, this is thrilling. Faith consciousness can be a force for new thinking, for reform, for renewal, for equality, for justice between peoples; and clearly it has been through history. But it can also be dangerous, not least because of the moral burden involved. Once Christian consciousness, once Christian awareness generates new hopes, new dreams, new action in communities and societies, there is always the issue of how those dreams may be expressed, given life, and of course, who will push back against them.

The Film: Silence

Let us look for a minute at Martin Scorsese’s recent film “Silence,” to register the point. The film concerns the Jesuit mission to Japan during the 17th century, where not only the Jesuits were tortured and murdered by the Japanese state, but also those Japanese subjects – especially the poor – who became converts. The film lays bare not just the issue of Japanese retribution, but the more subtle question of the moral burden of Christian mission and evangelization amid situations of repression. In the story, Fr. Ferreira, a widely revered Jesuit, has apparently apostasized, rejected Jesus, rejected the Christian faith, and it is for this reason that Frs Rodrigues and Garupe, commit to travel to find him and to “save his soul”. What stands out in the scene we have just watched, is the way Rodrigues and Garupe see *through only one eye*: the singular, exclusive goal of winning conversions.

Ferreira however is of a different view. Key to Ferreira’s thinking and final act of apostasy, which we see later in the film, is his concern for the very lives of Japanese converts, who will continue to die, as long as he (Ferreira), prolongs his work and maintains his religious identity as a Jesuit. In short, in contrast to Rodrigues and Garupe, Ferreira *sees with two eyes*: he understands the agony of being a Jesuit, committed to evangelization, while also comprehending the moral burden of being a missionary in a hostile situation. For Ferreira, fatuous, puerile, boneheaded faith, that puts people at risk in order to increase the tally of Christian conversions, is unacceptable. Ferreira cannot control the Japanese authorities and their violence, but he can address his own behaviour, relenting in producing conversions – as difficult as that is - so that lives may be saved. That, he believes, as contrary as it may appear at first thought, is what love requires.

The Gospel

This idea of seeing with two eyes, not just one, of seeing with faith and understanding the moral burden that faith brings, is what stands at the heart of the story of Nicodemus in this time of Lent. Nicodemus, lives seeing through only one eye: his singular identity as a “son of Abraham”. Nicodemus is a simple soul: what

matters is his genealogical belonging, his religious heritage, his creedal tradition: not unlike Frs. Rodrigues and Garupe, for whom Jesuit, Catholic belonging was paramount. But what happens? Nicodemus is challenged, Nicodemus is confronted, called-out. Jesus statement about “being reborn, being born again, being born from above,” is not a call to simply swap one narrow dogmatic identity for another, an insular Jewish identity for an equally narrow Christian one. Instead, the invitation involves a much deeper process: the challenge to Nicodemus, to surrender, to let-go of his securities, his certitudes, and to allow Jesus to carry him. It is a disturbing invitation to rethink things in a broader light, to adopt an altogether broader understanding of faith and a richer view of the world, to break the dogmatic external barriers of religion and to come to a place of inward and outward emancipation.

To Conclude

There is something in common here between Ferreira and Nicodemus. Both, in becoming people of faith in the deepest sense, are required to abandon the religious externals. Both, in becoming people of faith, are required to embrace such freedom in thought and action, which will be disapproved of by their immediate circles of friends and the structures from which they enjoy recognition. Both, in becoming people of faith, must ultimately lend priority to conscience. Both in becoming people of faith, must see with two eyes, for one does not suffice.

Being one-eyed is easy and guarantees comfort. Being two-eyed is complex, and guarantees difficulty, but is altogether more authentic and rewarding. It involves emancipation from our very selves