

"THE MANY FORMS OF CHRIST"

TEXT: "After this He appeared in another form to two of them....they went back and told the rest, but they did not believe them".

(Mark 16: 12, 13)

INTRODUCTION

It's reported to have happened in Shea Stadium last October. During the course of a football game, a Jet player was shaken up in a violent collision. The trainer rushed out onto the field and proceeded to spray an injured knee of the player. A spectator turned to her date and asked, "What's he doing?" "He's giving him a local anesthetic" came the reply. "Oh that's good" responded the young lady, "I'm sick and tired of all those imported anesthetics".

Provincialism is a frailty that is difficult to shake. All of us admit the claims of the local far more readily than the claims of the universal. One of the earliest chuckles that the late Ralph Sockman gave me came when he pointed out that a newspaper in upstate New York once ran a story on a total eclipse of the sun under local news!

Today is World Communion Sunday, a fitting time for us to reflect on that spaciousness of the spirit that belongs to those who claim to walk with Christ. The way we follow may be narrow, as Jesus said, but we are not supposed to be.

ON THE LOCAL LEVEL

This spaciousness of the spirit of which I speak must begin in the local church, on the local level, right here among ourselves.

Recall for a moment the story of the Emmaus Road in which two strangers are overtaken by the incognito Christ. Eventually the moment of discovery comes and they know who it is that is with them. They return to their home base only to learn that the other disciples are skeptical of their report. "He appeared unto them in another form, but they would not believe them". Or, as the New English Bible has it, "He appeared to them in a different guise". The others doubted their experience. Even when the church was no bigger than a micro-dot, variety was viewed with suspicion and skepticism. We are one in the Christ whom we experience, but we differ from one another in the way in which we shape our life around Christ.

Two simple rules suggest themselves to us at this point: first, trust your own experience of God. Be your own person in this or any other congregation. ~~Do not be intimidated by self-certified inspectors of orthodoxy.~~ Beware of him or her who would standardize man's response to God, or regularize God's free flowing grace. Make sure your relationship with God is real and stick with it.

Second, respect the experience of others - especially those others who are "thrown" with you into the common mix of a particular congregation. Latitude and acceptance are the key. Remember that each of us brings his own history to Christ - his own emotional and psychological history, his own family and ethnic history, his own political, educational, and economic history. We may all be moving toward the same end, under God, but each of us started from a different vantage point. Openness becomes us. Diversity is the hall-mark of our pilgrimage in a church like this in New York City in 1974.

Remember this, too. Any congregation can be divided into three groups: the feelers, the thinkers, the doers. There are those for whom Christ is most real when there is an emotional surging within. There are others for whom pensiveness is the dominant mood of commitment. They are concerned mostly with articulation and the cogency of the Faith. And there are still others who are not turned on by either feeling or thought. They simply want to get on with the next task. In every congregation of any size the feelers, the thinkers, and the doers will be joined. Mind you, it is not for us to suspect the sincerity or the commitment of others. "He appeared unto them in another form". ~~Do your own thing.~~

AMONG THE DENOMINATIONS

Now this spaciousness of the spirit belongs to our interdenominational attitudes as well. God be praised that the day of intense rivalry among the various denominations is just about over and that those subtle games we used to play with one another out of statistical arrogance are disappearing.

Back in the good old days it was half humorously and half seriously alleged that in any given town you would find the Episcopal Church built near the local bank, the Presbyterian Church near the ice house, the Baptist Church down near the river, and the Methodist Church next to the fire house, and the Lutheran Church near the brewery. ~~I'm inclined to question how really good the old days were.~~ I was once in a ministerial meeting where a District Superintendent was talking to us about falling attendance in the Sunday School. Said he, "Our Sunday School attendance has dropped, but thank God, I understand that the Baptists aren't doing any better!" ~~And he was serious.~~

We rejoice in the fact that people today have been liberated from such denominational narrowness. Denominational loyalty is less compelling today than ever before. Why? I think it's because we have come to see that no one denomination can manifest the Gospel in its fullness. We each have strengths. And each needs to be rounded out and completed by others. I believe that something good happens when a Lutheran discovers himself in a Methodist service. Something good happens when a Presbyterian sniffs the incense in a formal service in an Armenian cathedral. Something good happens when an Episcopalian finds himself in a Pentecostal church where zealous souls are experiencing the Holy Spirit in real ways. ~~Something good happens when a Methodist finds himself in a Unitarian service.~~

ECUMENICAL SPILL-OVER

Thanks to the ecumenical fervor of the sixties and the seventies some fresh winds have been blowing through Protestantism and also through Roman Catholicism and Eastern Orthodoxy, ~~the other two great bodies of the Christian family.~~

Most of us are old enough to remember a day, in this land, when to be Protestant meant to be anti-Catholic, and to be Catholic meant to be anti-Protestant. But we have come to see in new and exciting ways that what we hold in common - both qualitatively and quantitatively - is far more significant than what has kept us apart from each other for five hundred years.

I heard a delightful story recently about a Methodist minister somewhere in this land who was engaged in an ecumenical venture with Roman Catholics in his community. He found himself serving on several committees with a Roman Catholic Sister, Sister Catherine. They became good friends and one evening he decided to play a modest trick on her. He called her up and said in a disguised voice, "Sister Catherine, this is Martin Luther". Sister Catherine, quick on the trigger, replied, "Why...~~hi~~ Martin - where in hell are you?" Ten, fifteen years ago such a

good natured, wholesome exchange would not have been possible. No longer can we afford the luxury of isolated independence. "He appeared unto them in another form".

NON-CHRISTIAN RELIGIONS

I believe a similar spaciousness of spirit needs to be extended to non-Christian religions. This is not easy. At this point, there is an understandable awkwardness and unreadiness on the part of many Christians. For the claims of Christ upon us have the force of an unconditional absolute. This is why we call Him "Lord". We believe on the strength of the scriptures that what He achieved has cosmic implication, and something within us recoils from viewing Jesus as one among many saviors, one Lord in a galaxy of Gods.

This tug within us between the local and the universal, between the exclusiveness and the inclusiveness of Jesus, is not an easy pain to live with, to think about. I speak here from personal experience, as one who for several years has taught a course in world religions to some very keen high school students in the city. Their openness and honesty is most challenging to me.

Paul Tillich gave his great mind to this problem and he determined that there were groups in the world that were "in preparation" for what he called "the ultimate revelation" and groups that had already received it. He put it this way,

"All religions and cultures outside the church, according to the Christian judgement, are still in the period of preparation. And, even more, there are many groups and individuals within the Christian nations and the Christian churches who are definitely in the stage of preparation. They have never received the message of the final revelation in its meaning and power".

And Tillich goes on to point out that,

"The final revelation is the CRITERION of every religion and of every culture, not only of the culture and religion in and through which it has appeared. What God has done for men in his self-disclosure is valid for the social existence of every human group and for the personal existence of every human individual".

How do we then open ourselves to dialogue with other religions without either feelings of guilt or of arrogance? Perhaps it would be helpful for us to remember how John in the prologue of his gospel in the First Century described the Christ as the "logos". The "logos" or "word" proceeds from God eternally. The God of Christian faith is unfailingly self-disclosing. John describes the "logos" as "the true light that enlightens every man". God is never without a witness. Just as all of God was not disclosed in Christ, so all of the Christ was not disclosed in Jesus. God has at his disposal a variety of ways and means for revelation and self-disclosure.

All of this by way of pointing up the need for open conversations - especially with Judaism and the Eastern religions. These others faiths are there, and they can be ignored only at high cost. Solzhenitsyn is convincing when he writes:

"There is no such thing left on our earth as Internal Affairs.
And the only salvation of humanity lies in everyone concerning himself with everything - everywhere: the peoples of the East

would not be totally indifferent to what takes place in the West; and the peoples of the West would not be totally indifferent to what takes place in the East".

WHAT MIGHT WE EXPECT

You ask, what might we expect from open conversations with the followers of other faiths.

For one thing, we can expect to be corrected at certain points. Those who stand as outsiders to our center can point out flaws and weaknesses that our sight has learned to overlook. To see ourselves as others see us, or to have others communicate to us what they see when they regard our lives from the outside, is to have a moral experience leading to growth.

We can also expect to be completed. Many aspects of our faith need to be rounded out or balanced off. For instance, the activism of the Western world and church has made us less than fully appreciative of the virtues of inwardness, of meditation, of patience - so prominent in religions of the East.

And we can also expect to find points of convergence and agreement. From my explorations of what other religions hold dear, I have often had the feeling that it is not antithetical to what I have learned in Christ. This is not to say that no irreconcilable differences exist. They do. It is to say that when we listen and speak in good faith the chances are strong that we will discover lines of convergence. Religious hopes and longings are not all that different from one place to another. The names and signs and symbols may seem strange, but they hint a similar quest.

CONCLUSION

"He appeared unto them in another form". It belongs to us to have deep confidence in our own experience of God. It belongs to us as well to respect the experience that others have of the same God who is the Father of all mankind.

PRAYER

O God, Our Father, tho who has revealed thyself to us in Jesus of Nazareth, help us to turn to him in simplicity, in sincerity, in truth that we may always be conscious of the highest possibilities of life for all mankind as we find them in Him.

Lead us, O God, ever more deeply into the mysteries of life and death as we see them revealed in the bread and wine. Bind us more closely to each other in this fellowship, and to Him whom we call Lord, that we may go out renewed in body and soul - fed, nourished, and made new. In His name and spirit, we pray. Amen