

PRESENCE OF THE PRESENCE - A DIFFERENT WAY OF UNDERSTANDING PRISON CHAPLAINCY.

by Henry Smidstra

A ministry of presence is how I defined my pastoral model as prison chaplain. I borrowed the term from David Augsburg (1986); his phrase, the presence of the Presence. With this focus I enhanced my job description's first item which read, "To represent the spiritual dimension of life throughout the Prison." This mandate was inclusive of the darkest most god-forsaken depths of the prison.

There were of course social-political forces that challenged my desire to be a restorative loving presence in this fashion. I made my visits adding other services to satisfy the institution's Standard Operating Procedures. I still believe being the presence of PRESENCE is primary; God's loving presence is necessary, especially in loveless institutional prison regimes.

To be visited by the Lord was an Old Testament eschatological phrase that often elicited fear and dread. It was horror to imagine as an ordinary, common (unclean), sinful human to come into the presence of the Holy God. Old Testament social-religious life was regulated by ancient laws of taboos, and the ancient Holiness code was established by Moses to regulate every part of common life to avoid social contamination and to safe-guard fellowship with Yahweh.

Unless a ritual of carefully executed purification were to be performed as stipulated in the Law, the unclean person, of all sorts, was to be held in a kind of isolation kept from social contact. Some of course were in perpetual segregation, such as lepers, and gentiles; and, carefully identified unclean food must be avoided. Adhering to these codes was serious business lest the unclean person defile others and the holy place of God in their presence. Until these laws were abrogated by Jesus, to be in the presence of the Holy God was, if not frightening, utterly unthinkable, especially by an ordinary unclean person of low estate.

Seen through a Hebraic lens, the Angels' good news of great joy to all communicated an astounding divine visitation of Grace and love. Mary's fear, as that of the Shepherds, was short lived and astonished-joy readily took its place.

However, what was to take place in the most intimate recesses of Mary's body would be astounding and there was much which she was simply going to have to store in her heart. According to the laws of Moses, (Lev. 12) when Mary became pregnant and gave birth to Jesus she was rendered ritually unclean, excluded from the presence of others and anything holy for at least a month.

The ancient code implied that she was not allowed to hold Jesus strictly speaking, for Mary's child was holy already before he was born and dedicated in the temple. But the law specified, "She must not touch anything sacred or go to the sanctuary until the days of her purification are over (Lev. 12:4). Astounding! Here Mary, as an ordinary woman, ritually unclean, holds the Holy Child in intimate contact.

As mother, she was likely caressing and holding her new baby, her holy Lord, from the day of his birth. She was allowed a short interlude on the 8th day after Jesus birth to attend her son's circumcision. Luke records her purification as a poor woman when her prescribed time is fulfilled. Luke uses the plural in the story (Lk. 2:22) seeming to emphasize the ritual purification was for Jesus and Joseph as well, who would have been rendered ritually unclean also.

The incarnation is an astounding unlikely communion of the Holy God and an unclean person. The holy is not compromised, but common humanity becomes more than it was. In Christ's kenosis and subjection to the law, a great mystery of love and efficacy took place for human redemption and for the common good.

What had taken place in Mary's womb would take time to register and would be pondered theologically. Great Christological and Trinitarian doctrines would try to map the depths and limits of this mystery. It is still beyond human comprehension, of the entwining of the eternal incorruptible and the mortal corruptible human being. It is the omnipotence of God's Love in overcoming human sinfulness.

Oliver Quick, in his *Doctrines of the Creed*, 1938, links the ripple effects of the incarnation to its continued universal *koinonia*, communion or fellowship, among us. The eternal Word continues "tabernacling" with us in the Spirit to overcome human estrangement and exclusion.

The incarnation is a creative act of God, concludes Quick that refashions human nature according to His love (p. 168). Commenting on the creedal statement, I believe a holy Catholic Church, the Communion of the saints, Quick notes that the terms *koinonia* (communion) and *koinos* (common or unclean) are cognates, and that in fact they were traditionally the absolute opposite of holy, *agios*.

However, a great mystery has been revealed; a reversal, a new situation has been inaugurated "...to bring all things in heaven and earth together under one head, even Christ" (Eph. 1:10b). The great gulf between the holy and the profane has been overcome. Because of Christ's victorious suffering work in loving faithful servanthood for all people, the ancient code of separation has been abrogated. One's holiness is now not maintained by avoiding the common world, but rather by affirming the world.

After Christ's ascension the Holy Spirit is sent to the Church to continue to commune with his people in God's love and equip them in love. If there is any uncleanness today it would be by acts of alienation and exclusion; of rejecting God's love for others, by dehumanizing and demeaning the neighbour; and perhaps by extension, depriving creation of any moral significance. It is in the communion of the Holy Spirit we are all made one.

The church endowed by the communion of the Holy Spirit is equipped and called to be a presence of the Presence in love to all people....universally. Perhaps this is what John means when he records Jesus as saying that his followers will be doing greater works that Jesus was working when he was on earth.

Following Jesus, infused with his love, we are called to incarnate God's message of love to be present and affirming to the humanity of those declared undeserving and rejected, even to the enemy. We are not simply called to remember the Christmas story and seek comfort and joy in warm sanctuaries only.

We are called to be the message in word and deed out in forbidding situations, in cold places of division and exclusion. We are called to be the presence of the Presence in our current mundane and profane world. If the Church is

worth its salt and is true to its calling it will in a mysterious way, like salt and yeast, be an active catalyst in our world for the good, especially in places of prejudice, exclusion and violence.

Quick concludes that it is agapic love that must pervade all other of the virtues and gifts of the Church, and "...it is love that makes possible a true koinonia of the Holy Spirit, because it makes the results of his special gifts to be common property for the good of all" (p.284).

Oliver Quick : Doctrines of the Creed, 1938

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