

Sermon for the Eight Sunday of Pentecost Proper 13, July 21, 2007 Yr B
Amos 8:1-12, Psalm52, Colossians 1:15-28, Luke 10:38-42
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Jesus is the image of the invisible God.

One can only imagine what kind of image the Colossian people had of Jesus. Consider that this letter was written to them some twenty to thirty years after the death of Jesus. Keep in mind that word about Jesus had been spread by word of mouth. There was no organized religion at this point called Christian. There was no real central authority. There was no council of Nicea or Chalcedon.

What did people tell one another in these early years about Jesus? Primarily they told about the experience we now refer to as the Paschal Mystery; the death/resurrection experience. They heard about the good work Jesus had done in Galilee and other areas, and reports about his ability to heal.

Word also spread about the teaching of the apostles. By now even the Colossians would probably have heard how Paul had hated this new sect within Judaism, then was converted to their point of view and was now spreading their propaganda.

There was only one kingdom and that was the Kingdom of Rome. There was only one peace and that was the peace of Rome. And yet, this small group of Jews kept spreading word about a kingdom of God and especially a kingdom of God within oneself. They talked about forgiveness and loving their neighbor. What kind of person was this Jesus of Nazareth anyhow who preached such a radical teaching.

There were those who said he was the son of God but this could not be true since only Caeasar Agustus held that title. He had been crucified in

Jerusalem and his indictment read: “Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews.” Surely this meant that he was crazy; nobody in their right mind would dare to put themselves above Caesar. Even his own people acknowledged that they had no king but Ceasar. What kind of man was he anyhow?

Word of mouth stories and experiences were spread by those who traveled by land or by sea. There were stories that he brought people back from the dead. This in itself was way beyond what any good magician had ever done.

There were stories of his healing people and many of them were really fanciful. One of the stories indicated that he not only healed the servant of a Roman soldier but that he did not even go to the house in order to heal, he healed from a distance. This was unheard of.

There were stories of him forgiving people. Even his own religious leaders said that no one could forgive but God alone. What kind of man was he to go against what was taught by his own religious leaders?

There were stories about those with whom he chose to spend his time and more often than not these were not the most respectable people in the community. For a religious man he certainly attracted a broad spectrum of people to be curious about his teaching and even though he had a close-knit following of men and women he seemed to be recognized for spending his time with the more seedy side of humanity.

There was no doubt about it. This man, Jesus of Nazareth was something of a phenomenon. As the accounts spread it seemed that he grew larger than life. To many, even to some of his own followers, it seemed that

he was alive and moving among them. Was he indeed a God, half God, half man. What kind of a divinity was he?

Those who knew him in person and those who experienced him, as Paul had done, acknowledged that their lives had been changed. Paul had turned from hating the followers of Jesus to being their spokesperson among the Gentiles. Those who heard about Jesus became more gentle, loving, kind, forgiving. What was it about him that made people who only heard about him make such a drastic change in their life?

Some of the best stories about Jesus were not only about his ability to heal but about his being a great storyteller. Storytellers were a dime a dozen but somehow the stories of Jesus were such that they turned the social world on its head. He told stories about how to be a good neighbor and selected a Samaritan to be the central character. He told stories about Judges who had their mind changed by women who were overly persistent and then asked: *And will not God grant justice to his chosen ones who cry to him day and night?*

The teachings of Jesus were equally strange for a Jewish rabbi. He not only talked about loving ones neighbors, the stories told about him pointed to the reality that he lived what he believed and for this he got into trouble. He seems to have taken on the religious establishment not only verbally but he lived out what he believed and this offended them. He touched lepers; he not only healed people in the synagogue but he did it on a Sabbath day. He broke laws and then cited scripture to show that he was not the first to do so.

For a man who came from such a small village in the mountains he certainly knew how to turn the social and religious teachings upside down. He even challenged his leaders about praying in public and accused them of

being hypocrites. He challenged them to go back and research the scriptures since, according to him, they had forgotten the true meaning of it.

One of the more radical things this Jesus of Nazareth did was to send his followers out to preach without an extra purse or bag. Instead of them preaching and making money doing so, they were to go out and preach this Good News and not expect anything for doing it. They were not to have favorites among those whom they preached, they were to stay in the first home that offered them hospitality and their only reward for preaching was to be grateful that they got the chance to do it.

One of the fascinating things to happen to the followers of Jesus was that Saul, later called Paul, was not only a Jew but a scholar of the law. Saul's name was changed to Paul and after a period of reflection Paul began to make connections between Jesus and the scriptures he loved so well.

Paul saw that Jesus had brought people back to the spirit of the law, he saw in Jesus the fulfillment of the law and that people were now to live by the Spirit of God. Paul understood, at last, the limitations of legalism and, freed from legalism, Paul saw in Jesus the new kingdom of the world which had nothing to do with Greece or Rome or any other empire. It was a kingdom into which everyone belonged. It was a kingdom of love and mercy. It was a kingdom whose peace did not demand thousands of deaths but rather that one die to oneself in order to live.

When Paul began to look for images to explain the phenomenon of Jesus of Nazareth he used the very scripture both he and Jesus loved so well. For Paul, Jesus was the image of the invisible God. It was the God within us calling us to pray, calling us to greet one another in peace, calling us to die-to-self so that we might live.

Paul saw in Jesus an image of the body created in the image and likeness of the divine; Jesus was the head and also the head of this new growing community called Christians *For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell and through him God was pleased to reconcile himself all things by making peace.*

It would be another two hundred years before this church would gather at Nicea and later at Chalcedon to express an understanding of Jesus that began with Paul and the early church that they saw in Jesus “the image of the invisible God.”

Two thousand years after the dogma of Nicea we have forgotten the depth of the simplicity of the early church. Paul, under the influence of the Holy Spirit, calls us, as he did the Collosians, to stop and reflect on the depth of the simplicity of his statement that Jesus is the image of the invisible God and to reflect on the implications of this for our relationship with Jesus and with God.