

Peace and Forgiveness Reflections on John 20 and Doubting Thomas

[Anne Hess, whose vision launched the Inclusive Community, was at the April 15, 2007 service when Anthony preached this homily. She saw it as a charter statement for the Inclusive Community and asked that it be distributed to the members of our community.]

Christianity works best as a religion of kitchens rather than cathedrals, of dining rooms (for Eucharist) and living rooms (for the Word of God) and, yes, of basements (like the catacombs) and of closets (where only a few gather). To say this is not to romanticize the early Church or to prefer that Christianity marginalize itself from society. It is simply a reminder that Christianity was not meant for grand theatrical events. Such events are not bad; they are not, however, central.

The grand events of Holy Week did not go well. Palm Sunday was grand but shallow, exuberant but not enduring. Calvary was public but horrible, Roman theatre for the masses, staged with nails and torture. The burial has a certain public character to it but it is all wrong, the burial of the innocent, in a stranger's tomb.

Holy Week is more powerful in its domestic setting. Without these quiet moments, the grand events have no meaning. What works is the last supper, in candle light, in an upper room. What works is the washing of feet and shared words around a table of loss and love. The quiet garden of Gethsemane reveals more of Christ than Palm Sunday does. The garden on Easter morning is where Mary Magdalene meets Jesus and announces the Resurrection to the world. Even Pentecost happens in a living room where fear and fire transform a community of friends. In such settings, Christianity does its best. The public settings matter only if these domestic settings have priority.

In the first few centuries of Christianity, before it became a public, juridic entity, it defined itself as a religion in which people never went to Church or public worship. Such worship was a sign of Greco-Roman paganism, of large temples and civic celebration. But Christians met in homes where women might lead the assembly and where presiders did not require legal designation. In the dining rooms of these homes, Jew and Greek, male and female, slave and free came together equally around a table, a gathering that could not occur in a public setting.

The Romans grew suspicious of Christians because they met in secret venues, in basements and small houses, in catacombs and private places. Christians refused to make their rituals grand. They preferred personal encounters to public attendance. Christianity is less suited to theatre than to personal exchanges.

John's Gospel on the Easter doubts of Thomas catches many of these themes.

The great message of Easter is not so much that Jesus is risen but that the Risen Christ brings the world, not a miracle, but peace and forgiveness. Easter might otherwise have been only Christ's moment and triumph, so to speak.

Easter could have easily been Christ's return to the disciples to render judgment and to accuse them for their colossal cowardice and their craven desertion. Their behavior made his death incredibly more bitter.

John's account of Thomas meeting Christ is centered instead on peace and forgiveness, on the transformation of these into the Church's mission and mandate. Indeed, the human act of forgiveness brings with it divine ratification. "Whose sins you shall forgive, they are forgiven." This is an echo of the prayer asking to "forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us."

Forgiveness is an interwoven, interlocking experience. Our capacity to forgive is not only a sign of divine forgiveness but a guarantee of it.

But forgiveness, like peace, works one by one, face-to-face, in personal settings, with specific injuries in mind, with names known and spoken.

Clerical forgiveness or churchy forgiveness is cheap and artificial. It revels in public display rather than genuine experience. To say "I am a sinner...forgive me" in a generic way is to say nothing. It is theatre. It seeks attention from others rather than engagement with them.

Cheap forgiveness proclaims: "We love the sinner but we hate the sin." This is often another way to hurt. It leads, at best, to condescension and self-righteousness.

Thomas' doubt in John's Gospel may be more complex than it seems at first. It is clearly about whether Jesus is risen but a substantial dimension of this doubt, I believe, is about the impossibility of imagining peace again for the disciples or Christ's capacity to forgive everything.

We might ask a daring question. What good was Christ for Thomas and for us if Christ chooses to wound and punish us? Such a Christ is humanly understandable, after all he suffered, a Christ who settles accounts with enemies and former friends. But such a Christ is not the Christ of the Gospels. A Christ who evens the score is sometimes the Christ the Churches proclaim but such a Christ is not the Christ of the New Testament or of John's Gospel.

The peace Christ offers is not a peace the disciples deserve. The forgiveness he gives is a forgiveness never earned. The disciples forfeited any claim they might have had to forgiveness.

Easter is all gratuity, total gift, with no right on our part to a share in it on the grounds of equity or justice.

Easter is meant for kitchens and living rooms, for dining room tables where feet are washed and bread is broken and where we know the names of our friends and family.

Easter is joy in knowing that all our doubts about our faith or our worthiness or our lovability are taken away.

The cry of Thomas, “My Lord and my God,” came from a man who felt forgiveness in his very bones and peace in the core of his heart.

Anything less than this is not Christianity; anything more than this is not necessary.

We should not underestimate the simple line: “Then, he said to Thomas.” Christ addresses Thomas directly, personally, face-to-face, around a table of friendship. “Do not doubt but believe.”

This address to Thomas is as intimate as the Easter morning garden scene when Jesus says “Mary” and she believes.

There may be more Christianity in small gatherings of Christians than in huge, liturgical events in cathedrals and basilicas. In a small room where we know the faces and names, Christ builds a community of Easter grace.

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