

Toetrede

Liturgie van die Lig

Woorddiens

Lesing 1: Markus 1:40-45 (1953)

⁴⁰ EN daar kom 'n melaatse na Hom toe wat Hom smee en voor Hom op die knieë val en vir Hom sê: As U wil, kan U my reinig.

⁴¹ En Jesus het vir hom innig jammer gevoel en die hand uitgesteek en hom aangeraak en vir hom gesê: Ek wil, word gereinig!

⁴² En toe Hy dit sê, het die melaatsheid hom dadelik verlaat, en hy is gereinig.

⁴³ En nadat Hy hom ernstig aangespreek het, stuur Hy hom dadelik weg

⁴⁴ en sê vir hom: Pas op dat jy aan niemand iets vertel nie, maar gaan vertoon jou aan die priester en offer vir jou reiniging wat Moses voorgeskryf het, tot 'n getuienis vir hulle.

⁴⁵ Maar hy het uitgegaan en begin om baie dinge rond te vertel en die saak rugbaar te maak, sodat Hy nie meer openlik in 'n stad kon ingaan nie; maar Hy was buite in verlate plekke, en hulle het van alle kante na Hom gekom.

Broodjies vir die Pad

It is a great burden to be perfect... Unable to accept ourselves as we are, we wear ourselves out in an effort to become unimpeachable.

~ Joan Chittister

Mensliker as die mens

Gerrit Brand

Epifanie, die tyd in die kerklike jaar wat met Kersfees, die viering van Jesus se geboorte, begin en tot Lydenstyd duur, gaan oor die inkarnasie – God se menswording. “Inkarnasie” kom van die Latynse karne, wat vlees of vleis beteken. Van vroeg af bely Christene dat ons in 'n mens wat gebore is, gesterf het en begrawe is, met God te doen gehad het – meer nog: dat ons in dié mens se opgestane, verheerlikte lyflikheid steeds met God self te doen het, tasbaar soos in twee of drie wat in sy naam saamkom om brood en wyn te deel, die liggaam van Christus.

Vir baie mense is dit óf mitologies, óf absurd. “Jy glo tog nie dat Jesus God was nie?” vra 'n “nuwe hervormer” (om nie te praat van dat hy steeds God is nie!). Meer behoudendes bely wel die vleeswording, maar skop dikwels teen die prikkels daarvan. Dat Jesus God was, word dan só verstaan dat hy nie alte menslik en vleeslik was of is nie.

Dié twee reaksies verskil nie veel nie. Albei verklap 'n Godsbeeld wat nie met aardsheid strook nie, asof ons sommer net weet hoe God of “die absolute” moet wees: onbeweeglik, onaantasbaar, onaangeraak, buite die tyd – die teenpool van wat sigbaar, voelbaar en breekbaar is. Dit is wat “misterie” of “transendensie” dikwels beteken: God as teenpool van die vlees. As God só is, is dit inderdaad vergesog om te glo “dat Jesus God was”. Of as Hy dan tog God is, is Hy nie vreeslik menslik nie. Só 'n God kan nie mens word nie; só 'n mens kan nie God wees nie.

Die Bybel praat anders – só anders dat Harry Kuitert oor “die mensvormigheid van God” skryf. NT Wright skets dit in The challenge of Jesus: Die Bybel praat oor God as teenwoordig in tabernakel, tempel, vuur, donderweer en 'n sagte briesie. Jesus bied Homself aan as God se nuwe tempel – iets wat sy dissipels glo en verkondig op grond van die opstanding wat dit bekragtig en só God se ware aard verklap.

Baie mense probeer wegkom van “mensagtige”, “antroposentriese” Godsvoorstellings, skryf CS Lewis. Dan onthou hy 'n meisie wat deur haar ouers in dié “nuwe denke” grootgemaak is om eerder oor God as volmaakte “substansie” te dink. Dit het nogal skeefgeloop, vertel Lewis: “In later life she realized that this had actually led her to think of Him as something like a vast tapioca pudding. (To make matters worse, she disliked tapioca.)”

Op die een of ander manier vind dit weerklank in Kolossense 3:2 se ironiese oproep, gerig op Christene wat met skynbaar “hogere” sake gemoeid is, om van sulke “mindere” dinge te vergeet en “op die dinge wat daarbo is” te konsentreer. Wat daar bo is, is “Christus, wat julle lewe is” (3:4) – sodat die eintlike “dinge daarbo” te doen het met menslike dinge soos geduldig wees en vergewe (3:13).

Iets hiervan hoor ons ook in Hosea 11:9: “Ek is God, nie 'n mens nie.” Weerspreek dit nie die vleeswording nie? Lees weer, maar dié keer saam met die voorafgaande woorde: “Ek sal my gloeiende toorn bedwing, Ek sal nie so ver gaan en Efraim uitwis nie, want Ek is God, nie 'n mens nie.” Wat God anders as ons maak, is nie die afwesigheid van menslike worsteling nie: “Hoe kan Ek jou prysgee, Efraim? ... Ek kan dit nie oor my hart kry nie. My liefde brand te sterk” (9). Die paradoks is dat geen ander boek in die Ou Testament mensliker oor God praat nie. Dit is asof God mensliker as mense is!

Waar word dit sigbaarder as in die God-mens Jesus?

Brood vir die Pad

Oorsig oor die menslike denke oor God

Defining the human experience that we call God is not just a modern activity, human beings have engaged in this task since the dawn of civilization. The factor driving the change in the human definition of God was never a new revelation from on high; it was always a dramatic shift in human life usually brought about by a necessary adaptation in the eternal quest for survival. The God experience has always been given a human definition.

The first recognizable human religion, anthropologists tell us, was what we today call "Animism." Animism was a religion that perceived of God not as a being fixed in one particular place, but as a diffused and ever present invisible force found everywhere. Animism pointed to the presence of spirits connected with various parts of nature. In this animated world, there was a spirit of the ocean that kept the tides within its bounds. If that spirit became violently angry a tsunami might result. There was the spirit of the olive tree that when pleased caused the tree to maximize its fruit. The presence of "spirits" explained the life and behavior of everything: animals, plants, the sun and the moon. At this time in history, human beings were in the hunter-gatherer phase of our development, unsettled nomads engaged in the endless human quest for food. Food, generally speaking, could not be stored or at least not for long periods of time, so starvation was an ever present threat to survival. It was the religious task in this animistic world to keep the spirits happy so that those spirits would aid us in the struggle to survive. That was the primary human understanding of God for literally thousands of years.

When the shift from nomadic wandering to a settled life of cultivating the soil began to occur the human understanding of God had to begin to shift and shift it did. The first two places where settled human communities developed were in the Nile River valley of Egypt and in the area known as Mesopotamia, located between the Tigris and the Euphrates Rivers. In both places, the rich and fertile soil invited people to cease their wandering life and to settle where that soil promised them a steady supply of food. No, the shift did not happen all at once, but when it did happen, the understanding of God developed in a nomadic culture no longer made sense in their settled state. Animism now began to fade and a religion organized around fertility cults came into being. This religion, dedicated to a God conceived of as the "Earth Goddess," began to dominate the human experience. Ancestor worship was part of that shift. The reason for this addition to human thinking was that a nomadic people were always on the move and so their dead, even if buried, were always left behind and thus soon forgotten. Graves did not become shrines. When settled communities were formed, the dead were buried nearby and the idea of being surrounded by one's

ancestors seemed natural. Indeed, the act of burial itself was a gift of Earth Mother worship, since burial in the ground was thought of as an act of opening the womb of Mother Earth and placing her own children back into that womb.

Child sacrifice also grew out of these fertility cults. The idea here was that if one offered one's first born child to the fertility goddess, one would be blessed by that deity with many more children. Religion was then, as it has always been, in the service of human survival and survival had now moved from the daily searching for food in a spirit-filled world into the attempt to grow food in an agricultural community, where bountiful yields depended on the good will and favor of the fertile Earth Mother.

In time, however, those agricultural communities became bigger and more complex and thus they had to be both governed and defended. This new reality demanded a new tribal organization. The survival of these agricultural communities began to depend on both the military wisdom and brute strength of the male warriors, the strongest of whom would become the chief. With survival now dependent on both the fertility of the Earth goddess and the power of the male chief, slowly the deity began to be portrayed as a feminine goddess with a male consort. Over time the male warrior deity grew stronger until God came to be thought of primarily after the analogy of the chief. God came to be thought of as the heavenly chief, a single ruler who guarded the community from above. This was the first expression of a primitive monotheism. There was an intermediate step between animism and monotheism that was reflected in the gods and goddesses of the Olympus. Here there was a male chief, a Zeus or Jupiter, together with a female partner, a Hera or Juno, but with various other natural phenomena covered in animistic style by special deities: There was Mercury the messenger god, Neptune the god of the sea, and Cupid the god of love. It was the male-warrior deity, thought of after the analogy of the tribal chief, however, who was destined to be the wave of the future, the context in which the theistic nature of God would emerge.

Today, there is a general agreement around the world that monotheism is the proper definition of God. The monotheistic God, however, has taken very different forms in the various region of the world: 1. The Judeo-Christian world of the West and those parts of the world that were colonized by the West; 2. the Islamic world of the Middle East, a world that stretches now from Indonesia to Libya, and 3. the Hindu-Buddhist, Sikh, Jain, Confucius, Shinto world of the Far East. Generally, though more in the West than in the East, the theistically understood deity is dominant. God is thus generally thought of as a being, external and supernatural, the dispenser of blessings and punishments and the worker of miracles. It is this theistic understanding of God, which has been in place for the last 12,000 to 15,000 years that appears to be dying the world over. The death of theism is not the death of God; it is the death of a

human definition of God. If, however, one has no other concept of God, the death of theism feels like the death of God.

This death has been brought about by the study of space from Copernicus to Hubble's telescope, together with the work of such luminaries as Albert Einstein and Stephen Hawking. Insights from that field of knowledge have in effect, destroyed the theistic God's dwelling place above the sky. The study of physics, with its insights into the laws of nature and its new understanding of the relation of cause to effect, now explain many things that we once attributed to the theistic deity. These discoveries, coming first from Isaac Newton and then from his many descendents, have also reduced the credibility of supernatural language, which is the language of theism, including as it does, appeals to both miracle and magic. Our world no longer knows how to make sense out of most of the things that religious people claim to be theistic activities.

In our own Judeo-Christian tradition, there were always minority voices that suggested new ways in which the divine could be experienced and understood. In a previous column we looked at breath and wind as God symbols. Are there others that might move our thinking outside of and beyond the dying box of theism? In the scriptures non-personal words and images for God, while not the major thrust, are still present, and that presence forced even the biblical writers to recognize the limited and problematic nature of all human concepts of God. An impersonal definition did not imply a non-personal deity. It only meant that personal images were not big enough to embrace the mystery and wonder of the holy. Every word that human beings create and use is but a symbol. The best a symbol can do is to point beyond itself to a reality that words cannot possibly enfold. Perhaps that is why the Jews were traditionally forbidden even to speak the name of God, for to pronounce the holy name was tantamount to claiming that one could actually know God. That is also why the second of the Ten Commandments in the Jewish Scriptures prohibited any human attempt to make an image of God. God cannot be replicated in any human form. Perhaps those who engage in the enterprise called "theology" ought to realize that building images of God with words, whether in scripture, creeds or doctrine, is little more than another form of idolatry.

Listening to the minority voices in Holy Scripture, we hear different ways of perceiving the "holy." In the First Epistle of John someone appears to have asked the venerable elder, "Who or what is God?" He responded, "God is love!" He went on to say that if you want to abide in God you have to abide in love. Love enhances life, expands our vision, calls us to new understandings and opens us to the possibilities of growth. Yet love is still a mystery. None of us can create love, all we can do is to pass it on once we have received it. If we do not pass it on, it dies. Love cannot be saved or stored. If God is love, we need to ask the obvious

question: Can we then say that "Love is God?" Does defining God as love not carry us beyond theism?

A second biblical image for God is that of a rock. Well over a hundred times in the Bible, the word "rock" is used in reference to God. That idea has entered Christian hymnody in such titles as "Rock of Ages." To what reality was this biblical image referring? Experience tells us that when we stand upon a rock, we are supported and kept from sinking. Is that the connection? My great theological teacher, Paul Tillich, made that connection when he referred to God as "The Ground of Being." Can this "rock" image also lead us beyond theism? Is our "being" an aspect of something we might call "being itself"? Are we connected in some mysterious mystical way with all that is? Can we look at God through this lens and break the theistic pattern by exploring these possibilities? I believe we can. I think we must. The future of Christianity requires the discovery of new analogies for speaking of the holy. That is the first step in moving beyond theism. It is a slow process, but a necessary one. Once we enter it, however, new doors begin to open. We will continue to walk through those doors as this series continues.

~ John Shelby Spong

Wegsending

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