

Sunday, December 25, 2011: Titus 2:11-14

December 13, 2011

I was visiting the traditional site of Good Friday and Easter: the Church of the Holy Sepulcher, an imposing, exotic, heterogeneous amalgam of interconnected buildings in the Old City of Jerusalem. Oversight of the building complex is rationed out to the Greek Orthodox, Eastern Orthodox, Roman Catholic, Armenian Apostolic, Coptic, Ethiopian and Syrian Orthodox communions.

I was immediately surrounded by crosses, altars, mosaics, nooks, grottoes, candles, lampstands, thuribles and icons—and by Pentecost. On any given day one can hear liturgies intoned in Latin, Greek, Armenian, Ethiopian, Syrian or Coptic. Pilgrims and members of travel groups, often dressed in the colors of their nations' flags, filled up the space, speaking, praying, weeping and keening. Some pilgrims knelt to put their hands in the crevice where Jesus' cross was planted, prostrating themselves on and kissing the stone where his body was anointed and wrapped in the shroud. Then they stooped down to enter the grotto where Joseph of Arimathea's tomb was located. I was part of a pious, emotional, ecumenical, holy, chaotic Christian carnival.

In the midst of all of this, a challenging thought came to mind. Is it possible, I wondered, to imagine Jesus, the holy human one, entering this space right now, and looking and being in such a way that every tongue here would spontaneously confess, "Yes! This is he whose death and resurrection took place on this very spot!"? The answer was apparent to me: no.

The Christmas epistle from Titus extols the grace of God that trains and sustains us in Christian living "while we wait for the manifestation of the glory of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ." But on that day in Jerusalem I realized that we who wait are a heterogeneous amalgam of communities and communions, and that no manifestation of Jesus could satisfy a plurality of these. Any one manifestation would be too particular to have a chance at being recognized as the savior of the entire cosmos. Yet Jesus had once been in that city! Our lack of agreement and recognition doesn't change the fact that Jesus already looks like Jesus looks.

In Philippians 2, Paul prophesies that at the name of Jesus every knee shall bow. That I can imagine. The name of Jesus lives on the lips of every Christian pilgrim in Jerusalem and around the world. The name of Jesus does unite us. But the name is an abstract linguistic marker. As long as the actual Jesus to whom that name refers dwells only in our abstract Christ-ifications, we celebrate Christmas in safety. We are safe from the offensive particularity of the embodiment; each of us can design an acceptable Jesus avatar in our minds. In Alfred Burt's song, some children see Jesus as lily white, some as bronzed and brown, some as almond-eyed and some as black. But Jesus doesn't need children to see him all these different ways: he's been here already! He already *looks like Jesus*. The truth is that most if not all of those children see him "wrong."

Mary didn't give birth to an avatar or a name or an idea. Mary didn't give birth to a host of representative samples of humanity's diversity. Mary gave birth to one human baby whose annoying specificity warns us and protects us, first from worshipping only our favorite icon, and second from worshipping only the cosmic Christ, the eternal Logos or any other philosophical tag in whose inscrutability we can claim Christmas unity. Jesus already and only looks like Jesus.

Incarnation is a scandal because by refusing to look like we imagine him, Jesus *others* us all. If Mary's child of God is male, he is not female; if he's left-handed, he's not right-handed; if he's an endomorph, he's not a mesomorph. Jesus embodied is the inconvenient truth. If we are to enjoy genuine Christmas unity, it will not be in gazing up in bliss at celestial glory but in looking together at that confounding child.

The Jesus that we find on Christmas is a weak, small, improbable baby who grows up to be a despised and rejected outsider—first because he's from Galilee rather than Judea, later because he is scourged and put to a shameful death. No doubt this is why Jesus' version of the good Christian life is a bit grittier. Knowing that we'd never agree to recognize the actual Jesus, God invites us to manifest "the glory of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ" by finding him in the faces of the weak, small, improbable, scourged, executed and despised "least of these."