

“Recovering the Christ of Christmas: 1) The Indispensable Christ.”

a sermon by

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Charlotte, North Carolina

November 27, 2005

Text: “I am the vine, you are the branches, and apart from me you can do nothing” (John 15:5).

Several years ago I visited the great Hagia Sophia Mosque in the heart of the old city of Istanbul. Hagia Sophia was originally a Christian church, one of the two major churches of Christianity (along with St. Peter’s in Rome). It was built in 537 A.D. and for a thousand years was considered one of the most beautiful churches in the world. When the forces of Islam overtook the city of Istanbul (then Constantinople) in 1453 A.D., the church was turned into a Mosque. Islamic symbols were overlaid on the Christian symbols. Today Hagia Sophia is a museum.

One of the sights that caught my attention was a beautiful mosaic of Christ with outstretched arms. It had been overlaid by a symbol of the Islamic faith, but over the years, the mosaic was beginning to emerge and the face of Christ seemed to dominate the entire space around it.

I.

The season of Advent reminds us that at the center of all we are about is the person of Christ. That is a perspective that is hard to keep. There are so many competing voices. There are parties to attend, presents to buy, decorations to place, and a host of other things that demand our energy and our time.

But at the heart of this is Christ. The author of the Gospel of John reminds us of this in one of the famous “I am” passages of John. In Chapter Fifteen Jesus reminds his disciples that he is the “vine” and that they are the “branches” and that apart from him they can do nothing.

Nearly a hundred years after Jesus had been born in Bethlehem the writer of the Gospel of John understood that Christ was at the center of the faith. According to tradition, John lived in the city of Ephesus, where the goddess of Diana was worshipped and the Temple of Diana formed one of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World. And, yet, John believed that something had happened in the birth of Jesus that had transformed the world. Light had shined in the midst of darkness and the darkness had never overcome it.

But John saw something else; Christ was indispensable to Christmas. Everything else was simply an addition. There is nothing more important for our times than to discover the indispensable Christ. Apart from him we are nothing.

II.

The indispensable nature of Christ is evident, first of all, in his insistence that there is one God and that we are all children of that one God. The ethic of Jesus is often described as “an impossible ethic” and there is a sense in which that is true. Jesus taught that we were to “love our enemies,” “to turn the other cheek,” “to go the second and third mile,” and all of us know how hard these things are to do. But there is another sense in which the ethic of Jesus is as realistic as one can imagine. Jesus taught that those who live by the sword shall die by the sword.

That is at least part of the tragedy of the Sunni suicide bombings in the Middle East over the past few weeks. At the start of the Ramadan season a Sunni Muslim suicide bomber walked into a mosque in Halla, Iraq, and blew himself up in the middle of a funeral. At the close of Ramadan three Sunni Muslim suicide bombers walked into a Radisson Hotel in Amman, Jordan, and blew themselves up in the middle of a wedding reception. The problem, of course, is that you cannot build a nation on suicide bombings. It is an abomination. Any civilization that does not delegitimize suicide bombings against any innocent civilians is itself committing suicide.

Jesus also taught that “a house divided against itself cannot stand.” He understood that there is a common thread that moves through humanity and that if part of that thread suffers, all of humanity suffers. That is why the Sunni world should heed the words of Martin Niemoller, a German pastor who was imprisoned by the Nazis for speaking out against Hitler and National Socialism. After he was released from prison, Niemoller wrote, “First they came for the communists and I didn’t speak up because I wasn’t a communist. Then they came for the Jews,

and I didn't speak up because I wasn't a Jew. Then they came for the Catholics and I didn't speak up because I was a Protestant. Then they came for the Trade Unionist, and because I wasn't a Trade Unionist, I didn't speak up." "Then," he said, "they came for me and by that time there was no one to speak up for anyone."

III.

Then, too, the Jesus whom we seek to reclaim at this Christmas season is the one who taught us about forgiveness and receiving the newness of life.

That is a witness we find time and time again in the New Testament. "I came," said Jesus, "to seek the lost." "Those who are well," he taught, "do not need a physician." Jesus not only taught that, he practiced it. To a woman caught in the act of adultery, he said, "Go, and sin no more" (John 8: 1-11). To a tax collector, who had defrauded so many people, who confessed his misdeeds, gave half of his possessions to the poor, and paid back four times over all whom he had defrauded, Jesus said, "Today salvation has come to this household" (Luke 19:1-10).

Paul Tillich in his book *The Shaking of the Foundations* observes that "sin" and "grace" are two of the strangest words to us. They are strange, in part, because they are so well known. Yet, they are among the most important words in all our vocabulary. Tillich goes on to say that before "sin" is ever an "act," it is a condition. We are separated from ourselves, from each other, from God. This separation from others and from ourselves is particularly strong in the Christmas season. Part of the great sadness that so many people feel is the great incongruity of the season with its emphasis on family, loved ones, and joy and the deep alienation and loneliness with which so many people wrestle. Sin, in its most profound sense is despair, and despair abounds among us.

"But where sin abounds," writes the Apostle Paul, "grace did much more abound." I don't think Paul wrote those words to be sentimental. He wrote these words because they describe the most overwhelming experience in his life. In the picture of Jesus as the Christ, which appeared to him at the moment of his greatest separation from other people, himself, and God, he found himself accepted in spite of his being rejected. And when he found himself accepted by God, he was able to accept himself and to be reconciled to other people.

The moment, in which grace encountered him and overwhelmed him, he was reunited with that to which he belonged and from which he was estranged.

As the Italian film, *La Dolce Vita* opens; a helicopter is flying slowly through the sky not very high above the ground. Hanging down from the helicopter in a kind of halter is the life-sized statue of a man dressed in robes with his arms outstretched so that he looks almost as if he is flying by himself, especially when every once in a while the camera cuts out the helicopter and all you can see is the statue itself with the rope around it. It flies over a field where some workers are in a field. Suddenly, the men look up at the statue and one of them says, "Look, it's Jesus." Some of the men chase after the helicopter, but it soon eludes. As the helicopter with the statue

enters the outskirts of Rome, it passes over an apartment building on the roof of which is a swimming pool with a group of young women in bikinis basking in the sun. The helicopter hovers over the young women while the pilots call down to the young women before taking off again to the Vatican, where the statue will be placed.

Frederick Buechner, in his book *The Hungering Dark*, tells about watching that film with a group of college students in a small theater. At first there was a great deal of laughter at the incongruity of the whole thing--the statue made of stone, lifeless and cold, the workmen, pilots, and young women all full of life. But then, as the helicopter continues on its way, and the great dome of St. Peter's looms up from below, the camera zooms in for a moment on the face of Christ. At that moment, writes Buechner, there was no laughter. For a moment, not very long to be sure, there was no sound, as if the face were their face somehow, their secret face that they had never seen before, but that they knew belonged to them, or the face that they had never seen before but they knew, if only for a moment, they belonged to.

I think that that is what Christmas is intended to be. It is for a moment, just for a little while, seeing that face and being still. There is so much about the whole religious enterprise that seems so out-of-date, so irrelevant. But for just one moment, there can be only silence, as something comes to life, some spirit, some hope; as something is born again into the world that is so strange and new and precious that not even a cynic can laugh, although he might be tempted to weep.

A face in the sky. A child born at night among the beasts. And nothing is ever the same again.

Amen.