

INCARNATE SIGNS OF GLORY

Sermon preached by the Rev. Dr. Titus Presler, SubDean,
at the General Theological Seminary, New York City,
on Tuesday in New Students Orientation, 29 August 2006
Year B, Proper 16, RCL: 1 Kings 8.1-43; Ps. 84; Eph. 6.10-20; John 6.56-69

Standing before the altar in the temple for God that he has built, Solomon has come to the great moment —

the moment toward which his entire kingship has leaned,
the culmination of the project for which he has enlisted all the artisans of his own people and the artisans of several foreign peoples,
the fulfillment of the uncompleted vocation of David his father and now the climax of his own vocation,
the achievement with which his name would forever be associated —
the dedication of an undeniably magnificent temple to Yahweh in Jerusalem, the holy city of God.

And what is this temple?

As the text itself says, the temple was the house of the Lord.

And that housing policy for the Lord was fulfilled as the ark of the covenant —
the ark which had for so long been the repository of the Lord's presence —
as that ark was brought from its temporary quarters and deposited into the place called the Holy of Holies.

And the fulfillment of that housing policy was visibly apparent as God evidently came and graced that space with God's presence seen in the form of a cloud, a cloud so intense that the priests could not stand to minister — they could not bear that proximity to the very presence of God in their midst.

So there was the vocation, the calling, of Solomon and indeed all the people to invoke the presence of God in a particular place by building a house for God.

There was the intentionality lived out over a period of years as hundreds and thousands of artisans toiled meticulously to make that house just so.

And then there was the apparent fulfillment and blessing of all that mobilization as the invited guest appeared actually to take up residence in the designated quarters.

And yet, and yet when Solomon comes to the prayer of dedication in which he is to articulate and celebrate the fulfillment of this grand project he is struck by how the very notion of a house for God misrepresents the reality of God.

Even as he celebrates how this day fulfills God's covenant with David he also exclaims, "But will God indeed dwell on the earth?"

"Even heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain you, much less this house that I have built!"

In the broadest sense, Solomon's exclamation is a realization that all theology, all God-talk, is approximate,

all God-talk falls short of the fullness and the glory of God,
 we are simply stumbling around with concepts and languages that are entirely inadequate for understanding God,
 or, to put it in a classic formulation, all theology is analogical:
 our ideas and words are analogies for the realities.

More specifically, Solomon's exclamation highlights the relativity of every specific vocational and liturgical designation in the life of the people of God — and by that I mean places, times, and even orders.

We experience this sharply in the critique that the person in the street often launches against so much of our religious practice:

"Why should I go to church? I can experience God as much on the golf course as in a pew!"

"What's so special about Sunday? If y'all really believed in God you'd be worshipping every day!"

"Oh that priest thinks he's so holy, but my Aunt Millie is ever so much more holy than he'll ever be."

"Y'all study and pray in the seminary, but how about getting out and making a real difference in the world?"

The critiques from inside the church can be equally sharp:

"Our parish is so focused on Sunday worship, but what about prayer within families and Bible study groups."

"Here we've got a capital campaign to renovate the church, but our community outreach is pathetic."

"Everything's managed by the clergy — what about lay ministry?"

And then there's the critique of what we're up to in the seminaries:

"Why go off to an ivory tower for three years?"

Let's organize our own diocesan training program that will keep our future clergy focused on where the real needs are.

Seminaries promote clericalism, and, besides, we can't afford to support a three-year residential experience."

Even as they range over diverse sectors of our religious experience, all these critiques are asking the same skeptical question: "What's so special about that?" —

what's so special about that building?

what's so special about that day?

what's so special about that ordination?

what's so special about that three-year experience?

Knowing ourselves as we do in our own unfaithfulness —

whether as persons preparing for ordination,

lay ministers seeking to deepen a ministry of service or scholarship,

or as pastors long ordained and serving in theological education —

knowing ourselves as we do, we ask these questions, as well.

In tonight's gospel we hear the ultimate special designation, and we hear how it troubled people, as it troubles people still:

"Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them.

"Just as the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father, so whoever eats me will live because of me.

"This is the bread that came down from heaven . . . the one who eats this bread will live forever."

"Because of this," John tells us, "many of Jesus' disciples turned back and no longer went about with him."

Yeah, what's so special about Jesus?

Well, we say, Jesus was indeed special, for in Jesus God came to us:

Jesus was God in the flesh, God incarnate,
fully human, fully God, the human face of God.

And that incarnate specialness makes for a principle of incarnation in the religious life.

We are people placed in bodies, time and space,
and so when we make meaning we make it from bodies, time and space,
just as God made meaning for us in the body, time and space of Jesus.

Yes, there is timeless and spaceless truth,
but in time and space we humans need timely and spatial truth —
indeed it is timely and spatial truth that offers the deepest, most complex and most stirring intimations of eternal glory.

So as catholic Christians we designate buildings as chapels, churches and cathedrals,

and we designate all kinds of special days and times of day and times of year with particular ceremonies and forms of prayer —

"sanctifying time and space," as Marion Hatchett put it —

And when we gather for eucharist with the incarnate and risen one we say with due solemnity "The body of Christ . . . the blood of Christ,"
truly believing that here we receive the real presence of Christ.

And in preparing for ordination we do believe in God's particular consecration of deacons, priests and bishops.

**And yet with Solomon and Jesus we designate such things knowing that the designations are neither comprehensive nor final —
rather they are signs that point beyond themselves.**

Solomon asked humbly that the temple be a sign reminding the people of Israel that Yahweh's name was there
and even a sign reminding Yahweh to listen to the prayers offered by native and foreigner alike.

Even while asserting his own ultimate specialness, Jesus in John's gospel does so in order to point to the one he called Father and to the eternal life available to all through his coming from the Father.

So it is with all the items we designate as special, as holy: they are signs that point beyond themselves:

our buildings, like Solomon's, invoke God's presence in a particular place as a sign that God is in every place;

we designate special times as a way of encouraging ourselves to experience God in every time;

we commission and ordain for particular ministries as a way of catalyzing all the ministries of the whole people of God;

we encourage times apart in seminaries like this so that ministers may be specially focused and empowered for the rest of their lives.

In designating, we are de-sign-ating, signing, using a sign language to point to the Holy of Holies that is the very presence of God,

to that glory of God so intense that not only could we not stand were we in its cloud but we see it only dimly as through a glass darkly,

to that glory of God that will be consummated at the consummation of all things when all things are taken up into the very presence of God,

"when the earth will be filled with the glory of God as the waters cover the sea."