

THE WORD BECAME FLESH AND BLOOD, AND MOVED INTO THE NEIGHBORHOOD

Happy New Year! As the psalmist puts it: “You crown the year with your goodness.” May it be so for all of us in 2018!

For many years I have been a great admirer of Archbishop Desmond Tutu: the spiritual leader of his people in South Africa, standing up against a violently repressive white minority government while most of the political leaders like Nelson Mandela were in jail. Even though he’s only 5 foot 2, Archbishop Tutu loomed larger than life on the world stage. He’s one of the towering figures of the late 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> century, winner of the Nobel Peace Prize. He has been called ‘chaplain to the world.’ He’s one of those celebrities you read about and are in awe of but never think you’ll actually meet.

Then a few years ago, when I was at St. Andrew’s Cathedral in Honolulu, we had a speakers’ program. Bishop Ed Browning suggested I invite Archbishop Tutu, who was at the time on a sabbatical in Atlanta. Bishop Browning gave me a phone number in Atlanta, so I tried it, and guess who answered the phone! The Archbishop himself! He said he’d be delighted to come to Hawaii for a few days, since he needed a rest from all the activities that were being thrust at him during his sabbatical. He needed a sabbatical from his sabbatical! And we set a date.

I remember going out to the Honolulu airport to meet this famous figure, and finding everyone on the plane and in the terminal abuzz over the fact that Desmond Tutu was here. Walking through the busy Honolulu airport with Desmond Tutu was quite an experience!

Over the next few days I got to know two people, Desmond and Leah Tutu, who turned out to be very down-to-earth people, genuine, humble and unassuming, eager to please, and grateful to have a few days away from the constant public appearances and security guards. They walked on the beach, swam, relaxed, and when Tutu spoke at the Cathedral a few days later, it was one of the most moving experiences I’ve ever had. He twice filled the Cathedral to overflowing, radiating the love of God. The man just glows with the light of Christ.

Neither of the Tutus were the least bit intimidating, but interested in other people and very grateful for every little kindness shown them. I was even able to get Leah a last-minute appointment with our dentist when she had a severe toothache. Tutu later wrote hand-written thank you notes to many of us at the Cathedral and in Honolulu. I still have mine.

My grandiose image of “Archbishop Tutu” had become a real person, a friend, someone I could know and relate to as a fellow human being with his own strengths and weaknesses. He even invited Ann and me to come see him in Cape Town, which we did the next year, spending six weeks there, watching him in action in his own diocese among his own people. Who absolutely adored him.

I’m sure you’ve figured out where I’m going with this. At Christmas we have the same experience with God. “The Word became flesh, and dwelt among us.” Or as Eugene Petersen puts it in his wonderful translation “The Message”: “The Word became flesh and blood, and moved into the neighborhood.”

What an incredible claim! For centuries the people of Israel had waited for the Messiah, the one God had promised to send who would overthrow the oppressors and bring about a new order of things. But St. John reminds us, “No one has ever seen God.” They had this image of God as high and lifted up, on a mountaintop or in the storm, rather terrifying and remote. They had seen what God did, in the mighty acts of creation, in the exodus from Egypt and the entry into the promised land. Moses had even talked with God on the mountaintop. But God was beyond this world of time and space, unknowable and unapproachable and almighty.

The astounding assertion of John’s Gospel, and of Christianity, is that the Word of God, the self-expression of this unknowable God, had become human flesh in the baby Jesus. “The Word became flesh and blood, and moved into the neighborhood.”

Now God is no longer an oblong blur up there somewhere, a metaphysical, other-worldly spirit of some sort. We can see and know this God, as a human being like us. We can see with our own eyes what this God is like. We see God in all of God’s creatures. God is in you, in me, in everyone out there on the streets. Emmanuel means God with us.

Our Rector illustrated this beautifully on Christmas Eve when he came down from the pulpit and sat and preached in the congregation, as one of us. Not from up here in the pulpit, as someone said, “six feet above criticism.” Since that first Christmas, God is no longer just ‘up there’ – God is with us in all our humanity, “Emmanuel.”

When you think of it, that really is an extraordinary claim. Most religions believe in a divine being or a God, and my own conviction is that in some way we find difficult to fathom these other religions all worship the same God as we do. But Christianity is the only world religion that believes that God took on human flesh and became a person, part of God’s own creation. We now know God not just as some metaphysical being off in the heavens somewhere, but as a human being like us. We can see what God is like, what God does, by looking at Jesus. Jesus is the human face of God. “The Word became flesh and blood, and moved into the neighborhood.”

The message of Christmas is that God has come among us as one of us, as our neighbor, as the next person we meet on the street -- to show us how to love not just at Christmas time but all year long -- and not just to show us but to give us the inner strength to do it. Like Desmond Tutu, to love when loving isn’t easy.

Howard Thurman, the preacher and civil rights activist in San Francisco a generation ago, put it so well:

“When the song of the angels is stilled,  
When the star in the sky is gone,  
When the kings and the princes are home,  
When the shepherds are back with their flocks,  
The work of Christmas begins:  
To find the lost,  
To heal the broken,  
To feed the hungry,  
To release the prisoner,  
To rebuild the nations,

To bring peace among people,

To make music in the heart.”

“The Word became flesh and blood, and moved into the neighborhood.”