

“The Messiah in Disguise”

05/29/17, Ascension, St. Ann
Fr. Jim Plough

In a book of story meditations called TAKING FLIGHT, pp 51-52, Anthony de Mello tells of how a Guru meditating in his Himalayan cave opened his eyes to discover an unexpected visitor sitting before him – the abbot of a well-known monastery. We could make it a hermit in the mountains of New Mexico, discovering the abbot of St Benedict’s Monastery in Snowmass, Colorado, coming to seek his advice.

What is it you seek? asked the hermit. The abbot recounted a tale of woe. At one time his monastery had been famous throughout the western world. Its cells were filled with young aspirants and its church resounded to the chant of its monks. But hard times had come on the monastery. People no longer flocked there to nourish their spirits, the stream of young aspirants had dried up, the church was silent. There was only a handful of monks left and these went about their duties with heavy hearts.

Now this is what the abbot wanted to know: “Is it because of some sin of ours that the monastery has been reduced to this state?”

Yes, said the Guru, “a sin of ignorance.” And what sin might that be? “One of your number is the Messiah in disguise and you are ignorant of this.” Having said that, the Guru closed his eyes and returned to his meditation.

Throughout the arduous journey back to his monastery, the abbot’s heart beat fast at the thought that the Messiah – the Messiah himself – had returned to earth and was right there in the monastery. How was it he had failed to recognize him? And who could it be? Brother Cook? Brother Sacristan? Brother Treasurer? Brother Prior? No. not he; he had too many defects, alas. But then, the Guru said he was in disguise. Could those defects be one of his disguises? Come to think of it, everyone in the monastery had defects. And one of them had to be the Messiah!

Back in the monastery, the abbot assembled the monks and told them what he had discovered. They looked at one another in disbelief. The Messiah? Here? Incredible! But he was supposed to be here in disguise. So, maybe. What if it were so-and-so? Or the other one over there? Or....

One thing was certain. If the Messiah were there in disguise, it was not likely that they would recognize him. So they took to treating everyone with respect and consideration. “You never know,” they said to themselves when they dealt with one another, “maybe this is the one.”

The result of this was that the atmosphere in the monastery became vibrant with joy. Soon dozens of aspirants were seeking admission to the Order – and once again the church echoed with the holy and joyful chant of monks who were aglow with the spirit of love.

This story tells us something of the meaning of the Ascension. The story we heard from St Luke in the Acts of the Apostles seems to say that Jesus departed from his disciples (Acts 1: 1-11). He was taken up from them into heaven. But in the gospel, Matthew has Jesus promising that he would be with them always, until the end of the age (Matthew 28: 16-20).

Perhaps we can think of this puzzle in terms of the story of the monastery: that the Messiah was there in disguise. St. Teresa of Avila remarked that since the day of his Ascension, Christ has no body on earth now but ours; no hands but ours; no feet but ours. He has departed from this earth in the sense that he is no longer seen in his body. That glorified body is in heaven. But he is with us still, unseen, in disguise. We are the body of Christ on earth.

This is the sense, surely, of Jesus’ words to his disciples before being taken up into heaven: “You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, throughout Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”

Perhaps we are like the monks in the monastery. Our sin is one of ignorance. We fail to recognize the Messiah in our midst. We are lacking in AWARENESS. Anthony de Mello’s writings often focus upon that aspect of life, that we miss what is going on all around us; we are not perceptive. Of what use is it to have eyes if the heart is blind?

The Feast of the Ascension is an invitation to treat everyone with respect and consideration – in spite of their defects. Defects are a disguise. We are really in the presence of the Messiah. Who knows? It could be so-and-so – or that one over there.... You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, throughout Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth. even in the hermitages in the mountains of New Mexico and in St. Benedict’s monastery in Snowmass, Colorado.