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Acts 1:15-17, 21-26; Ps 1

I John 5:9-13; John 17:6-19

A number of years ago, while I was still in Los Angeles, word began to leak out about the formation of a new religious order in the Roman Catholic Church. Naming themselves after St. John the Evangelist, the men of the order were dedicating themselves to the construction of small Catholic cities, beginning with one in Pennsylvania. I do not know what has become of the project, but at the time, the plans were astonishingly ambitious. The new cities, whose plans were available on-line, were to be models of architectural grace, built in the medieval style of stone and other natural materials. They were carefully planned to integrate nature and foster community. The arts would play a central role in the life of the cities, with space available for potters and stone masons and painters and calligraphers, who would not only manufacture objects of beauty, but gather around them communities of students and art-lovers. The schools would be segregated by gender, and would teach the traditional M=medieval curriculum; the schools for boys would do so in Latin. In all, the plans seemed to be an attempt to create an idealized version of medieval Catholic city-states, and they fostered intense debate.

I found the plans weirdly compelling; after nearly a decade spent in the sprawling chaos of Los Angeles, with its lurid strip malls and strip teases, the idea of an environment deliberately planned to foster human flourishing resonated deeply with a need in my heart. Who wouldn't want to leave the crowded freeways and shabby concrete for a place of order and grace and serenity? And yet, I found myself thinking that, when God chose to be born amid the muck of stable and the struggles of the poor, this was somehow not what he meant. God came to redeem the world, not to replace it, and so God's people don't have the privilege of simply retreating into a carefully-constructed fantasy. Today's Gospel, which is a portion of Christ's prayer for the disciples at the Last Supper, puts it bluntly: "I am not asking you to take them out of the world, but I ask you to protect them from the evil one." (John 17:15)

But if retreat is not an option, how do we live the tension between our Christian ideals and the world around us? First and foremost, I think, we live *from* the tension, which means that we need to be sufficiently grounded in our own faith for the tension to exist. Putting it another way, Jesus Christ is not a metaphor. Often, I think, Christians at the mainline end of things adopt a form of cultural Christianity the way certain Jews adopt cultural Judaism. They are generally willing to consider the idea that there might be a God, but they can live perfectly well without him. Instead, religion becomes a matter of eating Jewish foods, supporting classical music, reading a lot, and generally trying to be a good human being. All this is very well and good. I love bagels, books, and chamber music, but Jewish culture was created in order to bring Jewish people into a living and vital connection with God. Without that connection, it really does resemble a bagel: all the edges firm and golden, but with no center at all.

The Christian version of this is not too hard to see: go to church on Christmas and Easter -- and sometimes in between for the music, try to be nice, do some volunteer work, spend an hour trying to read Scripture every two or three years (when guilt strikes), and be gently amazed by the crazy people who seem actually to believe the stuff it says. All this is well and good, and lays the foundation for a decent and orderly civil society, but it will never transform the world. And transforming the world was what Jesus was about.

Jesus does not ask us to come out from the world, but he also clearly says we "do not belong to the world." (John 17:16) Instead, he uses a series of comparisons to suggest how we are to relate to this world we are in, the world we love, but are not quite like. "The kingdom of heaven" he said,

'is like yeast that a woman took and mixed in with three measures of flour until all of it was leavened.'" (Matt 13:33) Yeast, of course, is the leavening agent. Without it, bread becomes matzoh: hard, flat, and tasteless. You can live on it, if you have to, but you won't enjoy it much. Yeast is what makes the unfinished dough rise, become soft and golden and palatable. So the Kingdom of Heaven is the essential thing which lifts life toward heaven, makes it rich and good.

Christ makes a second comparison: "The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed that someone took and sowed in his field; it is the smallest of all the seeds, but when it has grown it is the greatest of shrubs and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches." (Matt 13:31-32) Now, mustard is an invasive weed. If you plant it in your garden, soon, there will be nothing else left in your garden but a field of golden blossoms. Jesus' image, then, is striking: heaven is a bubbling, powerful, invasive force. Put a little heaven into the world, and watch it take over. Both are images of radical transformation: leavened bread is utterly unlike matzoh; a field of mustard looks nothing like a garden. (It also looks nothing like a tree, incidentally. Jesus is clearly having some fun here, imagining the weed even bigger and more annoying than it really is, as if to suggest that, when we work to bring heaven down into the world, we have no idea what fantastic things might come, things we have yet even to imagine.)

But what has all this to do with Christians? "Once Jesus was asked by the Pharisees when the kingdom of God was coming, and he answered, "The kingdom of God is not coming with things that can be observed; nor will they say, "Look, here it is!" or "There it is!" For, in fact, the kingdom of God is among you." (Luke 17:20-21) The Kingdom of God is among us, or, if you like, within us; the Greek can mean either. So, *we* are the leaven, the mustard seed, the subversive agent of transformation. This is how we are to relate to the world, and why we are still in it. God could not remove us from our context, because the point was to bring our context into God.

The distinctive characteristic of Christ's teaching was that he did not permit his disciples to stand apart from the worst that is in the world, judging, condemning it, and washing our hands of it. Instead, we are to come into the world as Christ did: seeing the evil that is there, spilling ourselves out for those who are in pain, working in our lives to transmute leaden suffering into golden joy. Olivier Clement writes, "The sanctified person is someone no longer separated. And he is only sanctified to the extent that he understands in practice that he is no longer separated from anyone or anything. He bears humanity in himself, all human beings in their passion and their resurrection... He includes in his prayer and in his love all humanity, without judging or condemning anyone, except himself, the last of all. He is infinitely vulnerable to the horror of the world, to the tragedies of history being constantly renewed. But he is crushed with Christ and rises again with him, with everyone. He knows that the resurrection has the last word. Deeper than horror is the joy."<sup>1</sup>

It is a tall order, a daunting task. Most days, it takes most of what I've got to keep myself in line, never mind everyone else. But if I had to point us a way, I would point toward that last sentence: "deeper than horror is the joy." There is a story in Talmud about the time when the Hebrews were slaves. The rabbis taught that, at the end of a long day working in the fields under the oversight of contemptuous Egyptians, the Hebrew men would be bowed down and broken, unmanned, unable to see their own goodness or dignity or desirability. But at quitting time, the Hebrew women would go into the fields carrying mirrors, and each would go to her husband and hold up to him the image of his own face. And gazing at it, at the mirror patiently held up by a woman who loved him, each man would remember who he was, would learn to see his own beauty again, would go home to lead his family and love his wife and beget children once again. From the hands of the ones who loved them, the men garnered strength to side with life.

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<sup>1</sup> Olivier Clement, *The Roots of Christian Mysticism*, p. 273

So we are to be with one another. We are the ones who hold up the mirror of our own joy to the faces of those who have lost hope, until they, too, can remember who they are, and that there is a God who loves them. Like Matthias, we step willingly into the place left vacant by Judas, offering up our own witness to what we have seen God do. It may be something simple: *We had such a great celebration of our young people in church last week. It made me remember all the times I haven't said how happy you make me, how proud I am of you. I know you're struggling right now, but you're a great person.* Or something confusing: *I have felt stuck in a dead-end job for years, and my heart has always pulled me to do this thing which seemed impractical. But I have been thinking, maybe that desire is there because God wants me to do it.* Or something transforming: *I had been drinking for years, really disappointing the people I loved, but I put my trust in a higher power, and he led me out of that bondage into a freedom I had never known. Maybe you should try it.* But tell something. After all, "Those who believe in the Son of God have the testimony in their hearts." (I John 5:10) Don't stand aloof from the world, but raise it up instead.