

You may remember the 1973 movie “Jesus Christ, Superstar,” or you may at least have heard about it from somebody very old. In the title song, Judas says to Jesus,

Every time I look at you I don't understand Why you let the things you did Get so out of hand You'd have managed better If you'd had it planned Now why'd you choose such a backward time And such a strange land? If you'd come today You could have reached the whole nation Israel in 4 BC had no mass communication.

The whole song shows Judas missing what Jesus is all about, asking him the obvious questions about why he set himself up for failure when there are very simple things he could have done if he were serious about the messiah job.

Did you mean to die like that? Was that a mistake or Did you know your messy death Would be a record breaker?

These are questions asked in good faith. Judas speaks for Everyman and Everywoman. When we want to get something done, really want to get it done, we maximize efficiency. How many more people could have heard Jesus if he'd used mass media, maybe launched a website and a Twitter feed? In the vast scope of human history, would it have been so bad for him to come 2000 years later than he did to take advantage of the superior technology? It seems perverse to get the word out on the small scale that Jesus did, and then, after him, the small scale that Paul and others did.

And yet the record also shows really an incredibly rapid spread of the Jesus movement around the Mediterranean in the first and second centuries, especially when you consider that it started so inauspiciously, a countercultural movement that opposed the Roman Empire and whose leader was crucified after 12 to 36 months. And think about this: this is not just the spread of a message, like when we

hear about who won the New Hampshire primary; this is the spread of personal transformation. The message of Jesus is that the kingdom of God is at hand and can be lived right now, by real people, including you. When we talk about the spread of Christianity, we're not talking about a piece of information but about the adoption of a new orientation, a serious change of commitment, a new lens through which to see all of life. This is a massive change for one person, and it takes place over and over, person after person after person. This is not the equivalent of joining the church today or in the 1950s, when that is not a particularly huge or countercultural leap; in the first and second centuries this was a serious change.

I said that Judas was missing what Jesus was all about. What could possibly make changes like that take place? Not technology. Technology helps us spread information, but I am not changed by information. I am changed by a combination of pain, yearning, and personal relationship. I bring the pain and yearning; God sends the personal relationship. And this is what we see in the story from John's gospel today.

Jesus "finds" Philip and tells him to follow him—there's a wealth of detail missing there—and then Philip finds Nathanael and says to him, "We have found the one that everybody's been waiting for, and it turns out it's Jesus of Nazareth." Nathanael is skeptical; the information is not compelling. He says, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" And Philip replies, "Come and see."

"Come and see" is a good answer, because what Jesus offers has to be experienced, not represented. When Jesus sees Nathanael coming toward him, he greets him as one already known, and then Nathanael's response is recognition of

Jesus. "Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!" And the argument is over before it starts; Nathanael joins the disciples too.

So I see a couple of things here that speak to us [about witness]. The first is that the good news that Jesus brought was not a proposition or a set of beliefs but something ineffable and intangible, something that has to happen between people. That's why "come and see" is such a wise answer, because words are not going to convey what happens in the presence of Jesus. The good news is something that happens or is embodied in community.

The second thing that I see is that Jesus already knows Nathanael, and it is that recognition by Jesus that makes it possible for Nathanael to recognize him. It's a righteous circle of recognition, if you will. Alyce McKenzie says, "Every time we recognize his presence in ourselves and others, in events and moments, it is because he continually recognizes God in us." Think of that, it's the God in Nathanael that Jesus recognizes, and Jesus' recognition of the God in him enables Nathanael to recognize Jesus. Someone once asked Mother Teresa, "What do you do all day walking the streets of Calcutta?" She said, "I behold Jesus Christ, the Spirit of God, in every face I see."

What did Jesus do? He lived the kingdom. He made the kingdom of God a reality wherever he went—some people liked that, some people hated it. But that's what he did, he said the kingdom of God was at hand, it was that easy, and he showed the kingdom of God to people in the way he was. Jesus recognizes God in Nathanael just the way Mother Teresa recognized Christ in every face she saw. It's

kingdom vision, seeing what's really there but only visible to those who have eyes to see.

What's here for us is a spiritual discipline and a call to discipleship. The spiritual discipline is to look for the face of Christ in every person we meet. I'm sure you all know the story—but it's so great I'm going to repeat it—about the monastery that was in precipitous decline until all it had was about four old monks. As I remember the story, they actually expressed their distress to a rabbi in town, why I don't know but why not. He came back to them and said, "I had a dream that Jesus actually is at your monastery now." So then they began to think who it could be. Could it be Brother John, who was so cranky but actually was usually piercingly insightful as well? Could it be Brother Elias, careless and irresponsible but terribly funny as well? Could Jesus be disguised as Brother Malcolm, a long-winded bore with the kindest heart possible? Could Jesus actually be in me, with all my flaws? Cautiously the monks began to regard each other with more reverence, more charity. They began to look for the eyes of Christ in each other's face. And gradually the visitors who came to them noticed the change in the atmosphere of the monastery, and more visitors came, and one day a frequent visitor expressed a wish to be a novice, and what with one thing and another the monastery began to thrive as a holy place where people would find blessing. What's the joke? Jesus was there all along, in each of them, and when they disciplined themselves to look for him, they saw him, he appeared. Our spiritual discipline is to look for the face of Christ in every person, because he's there.

And the call to discipleship is to live the reality of the kingdom relying on the grace of God. Make it as real as our flaws will allow—remember the story about the kid who saw a huge pile of manure and said there must be a pony in there somewhere? Like that, an ultimate reliance on the grace of God. We're not Jesus, though God is in us, but we know his style. He recognized God in each person, he showed that there was always enough to go around, he was not controlled by anxiety or fear but spoke the truth whether it was welcome or not. To the extent that we can do that, we too can be a locus of the kingdom, at least on our better days, and we too can love people into the kingdom as we have been loved into it ourselves.

Perfect Light of revelation,
as you shone in the life of Jesus,
whose epiphany we celebrate,
so shine in us and through us,
that we may become beacons of truth and compassion,
enlightening all creation with deeds of justice and mercy. Amen.