

My premise today calls for some explanation. Our reading is the first section of Paul's letter to the Romans, in which he introduces himself to them and looks ahead to the prospect of visiting them for the first time. I find very little to preach about in it. I can tell you that the Roman church had been started by someone other than Paul, and that it was mostly Gentiles. I can tell you that Paul hoped to stop there for a while on his way to Spain, and perhaps to get some financial support for the trip. I can tell you that the letter to the Romans is his most comprehensive statement of theology that we have, because he was introducing himself to them and perhaps trying to counteract negative things they'd heard about him. But the homiletical reason for assigning this passage seems to be his discussion of the nature of the gospel and God's power, and it is all more abstract than I think is useful in a sermon. So I'm explaining what I did instead.

I was trying to let the passage marinate, and what I started noticing were indications that Paul seems to enjoy missionary work because he loves diversity. Verse 11 has him longing to meet them. He says in verses 11 and 12 that he wants to share some spiritual gift with them—*or rather*, that they and he might be mutually encouraged by each other's faith. He says in verse 14 that he is a debtor both to Greeks and to barbarians, to the wise and to the foolish—as if their insights and conversations have made him richer. He was a well-educated Pharisee, after all; he must have loved learning as he thought through the questions and challenges that others posed for him. In his first letter to the Thessalonians, he answers a question he apparently hadn't thought of before, about what happens to the people who've already died before Jesus' return, and I really see him sort of working it out

for himself as he writes. In First Corinthians, he tells the church that even though they're saved, they can still hurt other people by the way they use their bodies, so they'd better curb their sexual appetites. I think Paul liked being a missionary because it gave him a chance to see how the gospel shows up in different places among different people. And so I decided that for today, we'd try something parallel—to see the good news through someone else's eyes.

So this is a picture by a Chinese artist, He Qi. He Qi grew up in China during the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976). In order to escape hard labor on the fields he started painting Mao portraits. Seeing Rafael's painting of Madonna and Child in an old art magazine, he was drawn to the peaceful smile of Jesus' mother, leading to an interest in Christianity. He Qi studied art at the Nanjing Art College and medieval art at the Hamburg Art Institute, Germany. Religious art from the middle ages often shows biblical scenes with European-looking people in European settings. This inspired He Qi to depict biblical stories against a Chinese background with Chinese characters. His work shows the influence of medieval European art as well as his familiarity with Chinese folk art, such as woodcuts, paper cutting, traditional weaving and embroidery.

This picture is called "The Flight into Egypt," and portrays the story told in Matthew 2, when Joseph is warned in a dream to take his little family to Egypt because King Herod wants to kill the infant Jesus. The artist has run black lines through this picture; do they remind you of anything or give you any particular feelings? * * *

Look at the figures in the painting. They're all very close to each other—

Joseph, Mary, and baby Jesus. What do they say to you? Also, do the donkey and the dove speak to you? * * *

Here's my favorite part: the infant Jesus is posed just like the Buddhist bodhisattva Guanyin. Jesus is seated on Mary's lap. We can only see one foot (with the embroidered slipper) pointing down, as if he has his other leg curled underneath him. Look at the other side of your page, the picture of Kuan Yin, who is traditionally depicted in a similar pose. Kuan Yin is revered as bodhisattva, one who has reached nirvana but who decided to come back to show people the way of salvation. That is why she is portrayed as if 'stepping down' from her seated position. This posture is furthermore known as her pose of royal play, to represent the ceaseless play of creation.

He Qi sees in Jesus the same divine image of mercy, "stepping down" from his heavenly identity. He is truly the Lord of Compassion because of his descent to finitude and to the cross. In a high Christology, Jesus is also the One by whose divine play all things were created and who holds all things together. In fact, this reminds me of what the poet Gerard Manley Hopkins wrote, "Christ plays in ten thousand places, /Lovely in limbs, and lovely in eyes not his".

Because He Qi has shown Jesus like Guanyin, I see how divine mercy and grace take shape and become visible in ways that I would not necessarily recognize. Without talking to me, he has pointed out that "bidden or unbidden, God is present," and that God is acting regardless of whether I'm equipped to see it. [what other ppl see]

I imagine that part of what gave Paul energy was hearing from others how

they were experiencing the sacred, once he had told them how *he* had experienced the sacred. Maybe this is why he was so interested in the mission to the gentiles, the non-Jews—because people foreign to the traditions of Judaism would see things that he, Paul, had not seen. One verse of the Qur’an says “O mankind, indeed We have created you from male and female and made you peoples and tribes that you may know one another.” When we begin to know each other, we also begin to know God better.

On what Paul means by phrases like “obedience of faith” or “righteousness of God,” I don’t have anything useful to offer. But in a time in which it seems that “the best lack all conviction, while the worst are full of passionate intensity,” we should take seriously Paul’s experience of detecting God’s presence and activity by hearing the voices of strangers he would earlier have ignored—Greeks and barbarians, wise and foolish. Christ plays in ten thousand places, lovely in limbs, and lovely in eyes not his.

Our God, the life of Jesus was filled
with events of unplanned travel and flight from enemies.

You have shown us through the modeling of Jesus
how we are called to relate to persons from different nations and cultures.
You have shown us by the example of Paul how to learn from those whom we teach.

We ask you, our God, to open our minds and hearts to the unexpected, so that we do not lose hope, and so that we may share with other human beings the clues to your redemption, on which we base our trust and our lives. Amen.