

Moonbeams and Mist

Not long ago, the actor Christopher Plummer died.

Many of us remember his famous role as the uptight dad in the Sound of Music way back when.

My aunt Jane and I had a bet: which of us would see that movie the most?

And I believe I won!

I saw it 9 times in the theater!

Luckily, movies were only fifty cents back then.

Whenever I think of that movie, I think of the beautiful song sung by those handwringing nuns about Maria, the free-spirited character played by Julie Andrews.

The song is entitled: "How Do You Solve a Problem Like Maria?"

I share these musings with you not because I'm losing my mind or getting nostalgic (although both of those are also true) BUT because that particular song takes us straight into our readings today.

I mean, don't these readings practically shout out the question:

"How do you solve a problem like Jesus?"

Here's Paul this morning, insisting that the power of God is hanging from a tree.

Here's Jesus, picking up whips and ropes and driving the businessmen out of the Temple.

How do you solve a problem like Jesus?

Heaven knows this isn't a philosophical question.

For 2000 years we have been trying, one way or another, to solve the problem of Jesus.

We have sentimentalized him.

We have politicized him.

We have nationalized and sanitized him.

We've put him on pedestals, hung purple robes around his shoulders and placed gold crowns on his head.

We've painted his likeness to make him look like a lily white European, despite the fact that Jesus was a Middle Eastern Jew, who likely had brown skin and curly hair.

So frankly speaking, we've done just about everything we can when it comes to solving the problem of this Jesus.

Everything, except perhaps, listening to him.

Which is perfectly understandable.

We want a Jesus who is meek and mild.

One who looks like us.

Talks like us.

And, of course, one who hates the same people we do.

But the Jesus who is Jesus is not that.

Jesus takes up his whips and ropes and moving quickly through the Temple, drives out those who have turned God into a commodity.

He drives out those who claim that God is all about tit for tat exchanges.

He drives out those who turn God into something to be controlled and manipulated.

And the powers that be plot his death.

So it goes.

Jesus was a problem back then.

He remains a problem today.

So how do we solve a problem like Jesus?

Try as we might to sweeten him up; to make him say harmless sentimental niceties; try as we might to turn him into some kind of positive thinking guru or an anything goes best buddy; Jesus keeps picking up whips, he keeps cleaning out the temple.

Whether that temple be in Jerusalem.

Or in my heart.

In Washington DC or in our community of Palama.

He calls us not to admire, but to follow him.

And following him invites action.

Once in our Bible study class we watched a video of a wonderful actor who performs the entire Gospel of Mark from memory.

The thing that struck many of us was how many places Jesus travelled to.

From time to time the video would cut away to a map of Israel and trace the many different places Jesus went.

He is everywhere, it seems, touching all kinds of people.

Yet he never stays long enough to rest on any laurels.

He is everywhere, it seems; but he is also hard to find.

After a long day of healing hundreds, Jesus goes out in the middle of the night to pray.

He finds a deserted place and there he prays.

The disciples angrily search for him!

And when they finally find him, they practically scold him, insisting he return to the town where his fame is rising.

Jesus replies:

“Let’s go somewhere else!”

As much as they (and we) wish to put up buildings and put down roots, Jesus says: "Let's go somewhere else."

On to the next town, to encounter the next group of nobodies.

Nobodies, who are becoming the saints of God.

How do we solve a problem like Jesus?

This peasant Jew who managed to enrage enough of the good people of his time and enough of the governing authorities to end up on the ancient version of the electric chair.

This peasant Jew who appoints Paul as his lead apostle to the outside world.

Paul, who carries the message that centuries later finds us, all the way out here, in the middle of the Pacific Ocean.

Paul doesn't speak well.

He starts off his career by killing the followers of Jesus.

Today, he reaches out to his fledgling community at Corinth.

It's a city much like New York.

A city at the crossroads of major trade routes.

A city full of sophisticated, intellectually advanced urbanites.

To them, this skeptical, dismissive, arrogant crowd, Paul is ready to announce Jesus.

What can he possibly say?

He says this:

“We proclaim Christ crucified.

A stumbling block to Jews!

And foolishness to everyone else!”

Notice what he doesn't say.

He doesn't proclaim Christ the victorious king.

He doesn't proclaim Jesus as a Rambo action figure that so many in our modern times seem to adore.

He stands in the only place he knows: that the central mystery of our faith is nailed to the cross.

On the cross, God reveals the truth about God.

That the creator of the heavens and earth, the Almighty, omniscient, omnipresent God, is a vulnerable God.

A suffering God.

A God who will die rather than kill.

That's the life Jesus urges us to follow.

Because it's the only life that is life!

It's the life where "letting go" comes from.

It's the life where "giving up in order to receive" comes from.

It's the life where "dying to self, in order to find oneself," comes from.

And if we sign on, it's a life that will take us not only onto picket lines and breadlines, it will take us into all manner of life where control is surrendered.

Where trust is, one day at a time, placed in the open, bloodied hands of this Jewish peasant.

Now I know full well that many folks listening to this are thinking "what nice pie in the sky it all is!"

Perfectly fine for a Sunday sermon, but come Monday, it's back to dog eat dog in the competition that is life.

It's moonbeams and mist.

And you're right...

In that song "How Do You Solve a Problem Like Maria?", the concluding line asks:

"How do you hold a moonbeam in your hand?"

The radical self-giving, the letting go of the need to control people, places and things that Jesus invites us into — seems to be only moonbeams and mist.

And yet.

Aren't the most powerful forces in this world the very ones that cannot be touched, defined or dissected by science?

Forces like love.

Joy.

Faith.

Hope.

Can you hold any of these things in your hand?

As the poet reminds us, it is your "breath that has formed and hardened the structure of your bones.

And it is a dream, that none of you remember having dreamt, that builded your cities and fashioned all that is therein." K. Gibran, The Prophet.

The life that Jesus invites us into looks beyond the apparent, beyond the seemingly obvious.

It invites us to peek behind the veil and to see the truly Real, patiently waiting, and longing, for us.

It invites us to embrace this truth:

Creation does not give birth to consciousness.

Consciousness gives birth to creation.

So this Lent, let's not only remember **who** we are, but **whose** we are.

And let us pray that we each of us might live lives worthy of the hope and the glory — to which we are called.

+amen