

A SIGN OF CONTRADICTION

The inmost depths of you,
your guts and your heart,
wrenched by the immense pain of this people,
that's what never left you in peace.
- Jon Sobrino, S.J.

No one is an island, the poet John Donne reminds us, sufficient to oneself. We are not isolated “individuals,” but social beings, called to that life of communion and solidarity by which we become *persons*. Likewise, men and women of faith are not islands, sufficient to themselves. There is no such thing as a solitary Christian. As a teacher in the early church phrased it, “*Unus christianus, nullus christianus*,” “a Christian alone is no Christian at all.” As church, we are disciples of Jesus *together*, or not at all.

In the same way, *communities* of the gospel never live in their own hermetically sealed world. We live in the midst of a society, culture, world, and set of ideologies — mass consumption, militarism, the craving for more and more “things” while the poor starve, inattention to the genuine hunger deep in our souls — which are seductive and powerful, all the more so when not recognized. As history teaches us, even the community of the baptized can succumb to the lure of the dominant mind-set, which has the power to engulf everything.

We are a people whose mission is to strive to fashion a world in which all may thrive, especially the last and the least — a world, that is, where the living God is the central reality in the story of our lives and our history. As such people, how do we find our way in the time in which we live?

The feast of Christmas illumines a path for us. We celebrate the gift of God's Word, enfleshed in the human life of Jesus, pitching a tent in the midst of the human city, with all its violence, poverty, and despair. But also, in the midst of a people with hopes, loves, desires, and hungers.

In the midst of the broken city, Jesus stands as a sign of contradiction, an epiphany of the Reign — not of Mammon — but of God. Jesus is experienced as “the Reign of God in person.” This “epiphany” itself takes the form of contradiction, of the least expected. In the words of Thomas Merton, Jesus is “present in the world he has redeemed, present in mystery, in poverty, in ways that are a scandal to human wisdom, in modes that confound the clever, the mighty, the affluent, and the ruthless leaders” of the world.

Jesus becomes a sign of contradiction, not as an end in itself, but because the mystery of God's compassion is the core of his person. Standing against all that degrades human beings and creation, Jesus developed an acute sensitivity to suffering in all its forms, and the determination to alleviate that suffering. He was not afraid of taking risks in order to make the compassion of God tangible.

Renouncing the fear-driven search for absolute security, Jesus lived as a free person, filled with the Holy Spirit, in a stance of total trust in the goodness of his *Abba*. The gospel of John

tells us that Jesus knew what was in the human heart; he was also drawn, like a magnet, to all that is best in people, and strove to draw that “new wine” out of them.

The gospel narrative brings us back to our own situation. Ours is a time of immense challenge; it can also be a moment of great opportunity for communities of the gospel. The challenge is not simply to *imitate* what Jesus did, but to live as faithfully and compassionately in the world of today as Jesus did in his. Jesus, the “Reign of God in person,” can lead us to become free men and women, unafraid to become a sign of contradiction, unafraid of taking risks for the sake of the creation God loves. We will discover within ourselves the capacity to say a No for the sake of living a Yes. In face of today's deceptive ideologies of war and consumerism, such will be a sign of contradiction. But, closer to the heart of the matter, it will be the shape of the gospel as we try to live it.



This Christmas season,
may you receive the gift of the One
who became poor,
pouring out his life
so that the world might be enriched
by his peace.

- *Your Brothers at Weston Priory*

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