

Date: December 19, 2004

SUNDAY: Advent 4

MEDITATION: The Mystery of Our Religion

Text(s): 1 Timothy 3:16

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Unlike the Isaiah text which Mary read, which opens the cantata the choir will sing, this text from 1 Timothy is not quoted directly. Rather it is the foundation under the second half of this musical work by Homilius. What makes this text particularly interesting is not only that it contains one of the earliest “creeds” or summaries of the Christian faith. Even more interesting, is the link the author makes between that summary of the truth of the Christian message and the actual way we live our lives. It comes as the capstone to a long section of very practical instructions regarding ethical behavior for church people and church leaders. *“I am writing to you so that you may know how one ought to behave in the household of God which is the pillar and bulwark of the truth,”* the author says. In other words, he views the church as the bearer and guardian of the truth summarized in this short creed, a truth that must be made visible in real human behavior and real human community. All ethical behavior is grounded on truth, and truth always compels ethical behavior, which by definition, means behavior in relationship to others.

Yet, paradoxically, this truth is described as a profound mystery, which in the New Testament always means a reality that is affirmed and experienced as true, even though it is always, beyond human comprehension. In six rhythmic lines, the main components of this “great mystery” are described:

*He was revealed in the flesh,
Vindicated by the Spirit,
Seen by messengers,
Proclaimed among the Gentiles,
Believed in throughout the world,
Taken up in glory.*

These six statements form a progressive story-line that encapsulates the whole of the

Christian gospel in an extremely succinct form. *Revealed in the flesh* refers to the birth of Jesus, a human baby, whom Christians acknowledge as God’s self-revelation. *“Vindicated by the Spirit”* affirms that God’s creative breath or Spirit overcame the power of death for the crucified Jesus. *“Seen by messengers,”* establishes the testimony of the apostolic witnesses who were granted appearances of the risen Lord. *“Proclaimed among the Gentiles”* testifies to the missionary character of the church and to God’s saving love for all peoples. *“Believed in throughout the world”* is a statement that, while it may sound like Christian hyperbole or triumphalism, was already becoming a fact within the lifetime of those to whom this epistle was written. By the second century, there were Christian communities from the Black Sea to the Sahara desert, and from the Atlantic Ocean to the Himalayas. *“Taken up in glory,”* recalls the church’s belief that the end result of God’s taking on of human nature is that human nature is now taken up into God. The great fourth century theologian, St. Gregory of Nazianzus, reflecting on human nature, used this very expression when he wrote, “Whatever is not taken up, is not healed.” St. Athanasius of Alexandria said it this way, “God became man so that we might become God.” That’s a mystery that could keep us productively occupied contemplating it for awhile, isn’t it?

And that, of course, leads us right back to where our writer began— with concern for ethical behavior and relationships. The way we grasp the mystery of our faith is not simply by intellect or emotion, but by living in relationship to others in such a way that we demonstrate the truth that God has shared our human existence and made it glorious. That’s why we sing Christmas cantatas, why we rehearse the story in song and drama and decoration and gift-giving. We are joyfully committing ourselves to live out this great mystery, in the most concrete and practical ways. In our faithful adherence to Christ, in our just relationships with our neighbors, in our loving actions, in our ethical

decisions, in our every day down-in-the-mud
lives, we proclaim the mystery that mere lumps
of clay like us are bound for glory.