

July 17, 2022 Homily

Today I'd like to link 3 messages and examine them: 1) the Epistle for today, (Colossians 1:15-28) in which is explored the relation of God to Jesus and to the world as well as Jesus' role in the cosmos, 2) A recent article in the Real Episcopal, a diocesan magazine about the new Diocesan Trailblazer, Jen Crompton, and 3) the reason why, in *The Wizard of Oz*, Dorothy, Toto, the Scarecrow, the Tin Woodman, and the Cowardly Lion all have to wear green spectacles before they can enter the Emerald City. To understand each of these 3 passages, we need to be able and willing to enter a different reality. In the first two, we are asked to enter different linguistic, conceptual and/or experiential world, ones we're not familiar with and ones, possibly, some of us might just as soon dismiss. In the third, we learn that L. Frank Baum's reason for the green glasses might also help us in understanding identity issues and complex theological statements.

Let's take a look at the Epistle to the Colossians—an epistle that many or maybe most scholars believe was not written by Paul, but certainly from someone in the Pauline “school.” (Read vv 15 & 16) Listen to how it develops a complex theology. In v. 15 the beginning word “He” refers to Jesus. This is not a “Jesus IS God” passage -- it has Jesus as the IMAGE of God (We can't see God but we can see God's image, Jesus.) And this passage doesn't attribute eternity to Jesus, which he would have if he WERE God. “Eternal” is a word looking in both directions; it means never having had a beginning as well as never having an ending. So this passage is saying Jesus did have a beginning--as a firstborn. This is the background for the phrase in the Nicene Creed, “begotten, not made.” This was a theological position of the time, but certainly not the only one. There were many creedal arguments—knockdown, drag out, and excommunicating! I'm not going to pick apart the whole passage, but I want to show that it employs such technicalities throughout that really are not our way of talking about Jesus. We tend to roll our eyes a bit when Paul gets into complex detail of a theological position that doesn't interest us much. Do we care? Why did they care? Why is it so important to them?

I don't have to tell you that Paul lived in another world. His hearers, like he, lived in a Greco-Roman thought world. They sought to understand the relationship of Jesus to God by defining it. In the new faith's infancy groups described the relationship of God to Jesus variously. Some said God and Jesus are identical; others that God created Jesus and Jesus therefore is a creature; some that he was in some metaphorical way begotten, not made, and for them this was a big difference. Also the writer places Jesus, a cosmic Jesus, present at all creation. And an added theme indicates that Jesus' very function is to reconcile the Creator God and his Creation. We ask why? Why did creation need reconciling to God?

In talking to someone about God and Jesus, do you ever bring up these topics? I doubt it, and it's because you're not steeped in Greco-Roman thought. Do you think 1st C people discussed issues of Jesus and God in terms of racial liberation, women's liberation, the source of personal self-esteem the originator of a world which evolved to its present state? I doubt it, because

they aren't steeped in modern individualism and modern science as we are. Who we are and what we think certainly comes from the age we live in.

The language we speak also shapes how we see reality. We may think we use language to describe reality around us. We think there's a stable reality out there, and we use our language to talk about it, analyze it. But also the language we use itself shapes our idea of reality. Indo-European languages are centered around nouns, static substances that are then modified by adjective words describing the noun and by verb words showing what the noun does and who they do them to. For example, "The little boy shut the door." "Boy" is the subject of that sentence, and then we have adjective word, "little," and the verb, what the boy did, namely, "shut." This imposes a reality and priority of substance on the user. We tend to see the "things" of the world; then things are modified by their inherent characteristics, and then the processes that occur in the world occur from one substance to another. There are other languages in which the verb is basic, imposing a more process-oriented view of reality. An example of this would be "Shutting happened to the door by the little boy." Processes are prior; it's secondary who did it to whom. The thought world or concept world of one language group would be quite different from the other. The point is, perhaps we make some of our own reality, but a lot of it is imposed on us by our language culture as we learn it.

So go ahead, roll your eyes at Paul and his followers. But having done that, study him, study his culture, the thought patterns of his time, factor in his language, and see if you can't figure out what he's saying—(and, by the way, I'm not going to say, "...figure out what he's trying to say!" He's not "trying" to say anything. He's saying it. It's we who should be trying to hear, trying to understand. It may be foreign to us, but it's well worth the effort.)

Now let's turn to the lead article in *Real Episcopal* for this month. Did anyone read the diocesan magazine that came in the mail a week or so ago? It might have been unnerving, upsetting because, as with the writer of Colossians, we were asked to enter the experience of another person that is not like the life-experience of many of us. If you didn't see the article, let me explain. Jen Crompton has been hired for a new position in the diocese—that of Diocesan Trailblazer. They will also assist at St. Benedict's, Los Osos. Did you hear that "they?" Jen has set out the pronouns by which she would like to be addressed, namely, they/them—I just used one in the last sentence. It jars, doesn't it? It makes you think that perhaps she and a partner were hired. The editor helps by making a note at the head of the article explaining the use of they/them pronouns. Here's a one sentence example: "Successful cancer treatment put Jen in remission but altered their idea of what they wanted to do in life." My first reaction, and I know it was that of some others, was to roll my eyes in wonder and maybe irritation that people can't just linguistically conform in such trivial matters as pronouns. But I got on the phone—nothing more modern, like zoom—and called my son, Ethan. For those of you who don't know Ethan, who grew up in this church and was 56 last week, I will describe him in a detail that will be relevant later. He's adopted, mixed race but looks more black (he's ½ white,

¼ Black, 1/8 Cherokee, and 1/8 Creole) and he's gay. He's an expert sociological analyst of the cultures of the LGBTQ+ (or IA) communities.

I asked him what he made of the article, and I read him portions of it. I asked him if he were editor, how he would handle this. As I put this, I'm going to use standard pronouns so as not to disrupt the mental flow of the argument. Here's his take on it. We can't know and it's not our business to know her gender situation, but he can guess that she's comfortable with who she is and, because she asks for "they/them" pronouns she's not comfortable with binary or he/she, him/her pronouns. He has found that some of the people who ask for they/them pronouns are into the drama of their lives, and as drama queens love to make demands on others which tend to be manipulative, and put others in the wrong for wanting to use standard pronouns. But 1) she doesn't seem that way from the article, to him she seems authentic, and 2) even if so, we deal with other types of drama queens courteously. He would apply the principles of the Golden Rule and of common courtesy to ease rather than to exacerbate the social situation.

How does he use the Golden Rule? He would like it applied in his life (example follows) and so should we apply it when meeting church colleagues. He said his experience is that often in the grocery store or at the auto repair shop men service providers call him "bro," "dude," or "man," all of which he hates and which do, in fact, hurt and depress him. The person saying it assumes all Blacks talk this way, Blacks would be flattered at the chumminess, Blacks love this culture. But he feels himself stereotyped, not being seen for himself. Nevertheless, realizing that the speaker meant no disrespect, instead of getting angry, he tries not to say "Don't call me dude!!" but rather, "Call me Ethan." He knows they don't know his feelings or how hard it is for him to let such speech roll off his back. His point is that since he has perhaps irrational and emotional reasons for wanting others to take his designation seriously, Jen should be taken seriously by him—and by us. Common courtesy would ask that we accede to and honor their wishes patiently, and it's little enough to do, now that we are more privy to the inner life of others than, at least I, was years ago. I didn't know the subtleties within identity problems; I didn't know what made one hurt. I knew Ethan hated to be called "dude," but I didn't know the extent of the impact on him.

But, on our part, it costs us linguistic discomfort. After all, "they, them" are plural pronouns, and no individual is plural. No, but one might FEEL plural or ambivalent, and not singular. "He" doesn't match the feeling, nor does "she." And anyway, linguistically we have a tradition of using plural pronouns to cover ambiguity, as in "Someone left their purse on the table." "Who took my ice cream cone? They're going to get it!"

So, just as in attempting to understand Paul, we are meeting another world—Jen's world-- which we should get to know and to feel ourselves comfortable with. Saying, "You shouldn't feel this way," or "You shouldn't think this way," or "you shouldn't talk this way" just says to the other: 'I'll just be me; you accommodate."

But as a last word, Ethan said: “Please, tell them they can roll their eyes!” It’s an authentic reaction on the part of many in this time of what seems to be linguistic change.

So what about *The Wizard of Oz*? When Dorothy, Toto, and the rest of the group reached the outskirts of the Emerald City they encountered a gate-keeper who stopped them and told them they would need special spectacles. He produced a large box with all sizes and shapes, found the best for each of them, even little ones for Toto, and proceeded to fit them and then lock them on, so they could not be removed. Ostensibly they were to guard and protect against the radiance and sheer glory of the City, but remember, the lenses were green. The Wizard knew that the Emerald City wasn’t green in and of itself; it was only green because you had to view it through green glasses. It was hype by the Wizard; this was not dust bowl Kansas, but a wonderful green city presented to them by the wonderful Wizard. With locked-on green glasses, you cannot help but enter another reality, a fake reality because of the imposed “filters.” This is a popular version of the idea that we always process reality, we don’t just “find” it. If you’re familiar with Kant, he says that the very structure of the mind dictates that we organize percepts in space and time. We can’t know that there is “real” space and time “out there.” But we can’t help organizing what we see, taste, feel, and hear in space and time categories. The mind does it without recognizing it. That’s the way our mind is made—it’s our locked-on green glasses.

Maybe we should branch out and put on Greco-Roman thought filters to understand Paul. Or “other-peoples’-experience” filters to understand Jen. They’d be called “empathy.” Or maybe, in dried up California, green glasses! So it’s well to remember that what we’ve been led to believe is our reality is not the last word in reality studies. No, what we think reality is, is conditioned by the thought forms of the day, by the language we learned in which we express our reality, by our experience in life of building our identity, and by the filters and structures of the mind (read, green glasses.) Once we know this and let ourselves feel the import of it, we will stop making others accommodate to the way we think things should be viewed, said, or done.