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40<sup>th</sup> Anniversary

February 6, 2009

Dear Friends of Unity Acres:

In our main office hangs an oil painting by Jim Homer. It has hung on the wall in what had been Kate Stanton's quarters, and has never been moved, for at least the last 17 years. The painting is a close copy of a wood-cut originally created by Fritz Eichenberg, a German-Jewish convert to Quakerism. In the 13 years since Kate's death in October 1995, her quarters have been transformed into office space: there is little left here of her few simple possessions to suggest that this space was once someone's modest home. Jim's picture is one of those few reminders.

Eichenberg's *Christ of the Breadlines* presents a "line of men and women waiting their turn for a handout of bread – an image literally inspired by the breadline that daily formed outside the Catholic Worker house of hospitality. In the midst of the line, however, is the unmistakable silhouette of Christ, awaiting his turn among the hungry." This image has been used by many Catholic Worker communities throughout the United States and beyond as a symbol of the works of mercy that these communities engage in: feeding and welcoming the destitute and the homeless.

Dorothy Day: *"But it was seeing Christ in others, loving the Christ you saw in others. Greater than this, it was having faith in the Christ in others without being able to see Him. Blessed is he that believes without seeing."*

Inspired by Jesus' teaching concerning the Last Judgment, and his continuing presence in our fallen world: "I was hungry and you fed me, homeless and you gave me shelter, ill-clad..." (Matthew 25, 36f), Fritz Eichenberg's *Christ of the Breadlines* illustrates Jesus' on-going presence in our contemporary world, in our quotidian struggles, "that Christ comes to us disguised in the need of our neighbor, so that what we do for the poor we do directly for him." That anyone whom we meet in everyday life, particularly the homeless poor, the hungry, the refugee, the outcast, the prisoner, may be Christ himself. And even if, and even when, our very human inclination is to turn away in exhaustion, in frustration, and out of a sometimes overwhelming sense of futility and uselessness. With eyes and ears and hearts trained by scripture and the discipline of prayer, through perseverance and struggle, and despite difficulties and setbacks, we train ourselves to hear and to see Jesus in our homeless friends who come to Unity Acres, seeking shelter, food, clothing, and welcome.

## The Divine Presence: Can God have a place in this World?

During the age of the Patriarchs, in Genesis, God had makes himself known to Abraham, to Isaac, to Jacob. In Exodus, he makes himself known to, and speaks to, and discloses his proper name to Moses (3, 4-15) and appears, finally, before the whole people of Israel (19, 16-25). From the Exodus until the foundation of the Temple, God accompanied and led his people, in a column of cloud, in a pillar of fire, in tent and tabernacle, leading the life of a wanderer. But what is the nature of God's presence in the midst of the people. When the Children of Israel departed the land of Egypt, they did so by means of a crooked path "lest they change their minds and return." (13, 17) Only when the Israelites reach Etham, encamped at the edge of the wilderness, do we read, unambiguously, that: "The Lord preceded them, in the daytime by means of a column of cloud to show them the way ..." (13, 21) Even so, the people are in fear of Pharaoh and Pharaoh's army, and complain to Moses, "*Was it for want of graves in Egypt that you brought us out...?*" (14, 11)

And only after the miraculous crossing of the Sea do we read: "*Israel saw the mighty hand, the things which the LORD did to the Egyptians....*" (14, 31 - LXX) But faith and the 'seen' are juxtaposed and held in tension against one another: "Faith is the realization of what is hoped for and evidence of things *not seen*.... It was through his faith that Noah, when he had been warned by God of something he had *never seen* before, felt a holy fear and built an ark to save his family." (Heb 11, 1. 7) Even as Israel has seen the "wondrous power" which God wielded against the Egyptians, and praised God's hand "glorious in power" in the Song at the Sea (15, 1-21), still, immediately after the splitting of the Sea and the people's transit through the Sea on dry ground, immediately after the jubilant song of praise, the people complain about the lack of drinking water, "*What shall we drink?*" (15, 24) The crisis of water is resolved, and one month exactly after leaving Egypt the people again complain, now of a lack of food, "*If only we had died by the hand of the LORD in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the fleshpots and ate our fill of bread...*" (16, 1)

The narrative progresses from certainty to doubt. Whereas at Exodus 13, 21 we read: "the Lord preceded them...", by Exodus 17, 7 we read: "The place was named Massah and Meribah because of the grumbings of the sons of Israel, and because they put Yahweh to the test by saying, '*is Yahweh with us or not?*' " And so we read, and so we ask: "Is God present or not?" We read and we ask: "If He is present, then how is He present?"

And when God appeared to the Israelite people at Sinai, the Divine Presence is terrible, awesome, frightening; it is 'utterly other' [the *ganz andere* of Rudolph Otto]: "All the people *trembled*... The mountain of Sinai was wrapped entirely in smoke, because the LORD had descended on it in the form of fire. Like smoke from a furnace the smoke went up, and the whole mountain shook violently." (Ex 18, 16. 18) Both mountain and people tremble. At last, the people are terrified and beg Moses, "let not God speak to us, or we shall die." (20, 20) We read: "The LORD will come down on Mount Sinai *before the eyes* of all the people" (19, 11), and "they [the elders of Israel] *beheld* the God of Israel...after gazing on God, they could still eat and drink." (24, 10.11) But we also read: "warn the people not to break through toward the LORD in order to *see* him; otherwise many of them will be struck down." So quite rightly we ask: "Did they see, and what did they see?"

*Anxiety*: the pivoting point between certainty and doubt. Desire and fear are at war in their hearts: their desire to see God, to have God in their midst is in conflict with their fear of God's mighty power, his wrath. *Mysterium tremendum et fascinans*. Anxiety about God's presence is heightened in Moses' discourse to the people in Deuteronomy: "You came near and stood at the foot of the mountain, which blazed to the

very sky with fire and was enveloped in a dense black cloud. Then the LORD spoke to you from the midst of the fire. You heard the words, but *saw no form*; there was only a voice... *You saw no form* at all on the day the LORD spoke to you at Horeb in the midst of the fire." (4, 11f.15)

In creating the world, God had first created a void: a place of absence. R. Nachman of Bratzlav describes the contraction of a God "who permeates the universe, so as to allow for a hollow space, free of his presence. Within this space, the *chalal panui*, a world can be created, a world of limits and measures, of time and space, of not-God." (Avivah Gottlieb Zornberg, *The Particulars of Rapture*) A midrashic commentary notes that God created this void by tearing an opening within His Heart. The Void that our world is, is an empty space that God offer to us, to allow us to offer it back to him. "It is God who in love withdraws from us so that we can love him... Necessity is the screen set between God and us so that we can be. ... God could only create by hiding himself. Otherwise there would be nothing but himself." (Simone Weil, *Gravity and Grace*) Reciprocally, the void is an empty place in our hearts, ready to welcome God. Abraham, it is said, ran from the entrance of his tent to welcome the angels. (Gn 18, 2, Hebrews 13, 2) He had kept a place in his heart empty, and ready for his guests. It was from this inner disposition that every other gift would derive.



*Christ of the Breadlines*

Fritz Eichenberg

"The Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us." (John 1, 14) *Was made flesh*: therefore subject to all the vicissitudes that human flesh is heir to, and able to identify especially with the suffering of the homeless, the hungry, etc. *And dwelt among us*. Literally: "pitched his tent among us" [ἐσκήνωσεν ἐν ἡμῖν]. He led a wanderer's life; he walked among the poor, and in the midst of the people.

We understand the Incarnation to be an on-going fact. During celebrations of the liturgy, at the preparation of the gifts, when the priest pours water and wine into the chalice, he says quietly: *By the*

*mystery of this water and wine may we come to share in the divinity of Christ who humbled himself to share in our humanity. And when the people recite the words of the creed, 'by the power of the Holy Spirit, he was born of the Virgin Mary, and became man,' the rubrics indicate that they are to bow, signifying their humbled astonishment at God's indwelling presence in the world. Scripture indicates that the cross is for the Jews scandal, for the Greeks folly, (1 Cor 1,23) but the primary and original scandal is perhaps that God manifests his presence in human form at all.*

Jesus is even now present in many ways: "in his word, in his Church's prayer, 'where two or three are gathered in my name', *in the poor, the sick, and the imprisoned....*" (Catechism, §1373) ." If we do not see Christ in our brothers and sisters, particular in the homeless and ill-clad poor, the sick and the hungry, the exile and the dispossessed, then we deny Christ himself. "How can you see Christ in people?" Dorothy Day wrote, "It is an act of faith, constantly repeated. It is an act of love, resulting from an act of faith. It is an act of hope, that we can awaken these same acts in their hearts, too, with the help of God, and the Works of Mercy, which you, our readers, help us to do, day in and day out over the years... How do we know we believe? ... Because we have seen His hands and His feet in the poor around us."

We do not believe because we see. We see because we believe.

Stephen Dickhout

## Prayer: February ~ March 2009

### The Holy Season of Lent

(Based on Psalm 51, Ash Wednesday Mass)

"Be Merciful, O Lord, for we have sinned."

We thank You, O God, for another Lenten Season:

"The acceptable time, the day of salvation."

(2 Cor. 6: 2, Ash Wednesday)

We, Your prodigal children, turn back to You in response to Your loving call. May our humble prayer be with "contrite and humbled hearts, which you will not scorn"

"Have mercy on us in Your goodness, in the greatness of Your compassion, wipe out our offenses": our pride, prejudice, our materialistic greed, our impatience. Remove from us arrogance, lust for power and pleasure. Wipe out every cynicism, the mania for more and more while others have less and less.

"A clean heart create for us, and a steadfast spirit renew within us." Our hearts waver and become hardened. Renew them with Your love. Renew in us hearts firm and faithful, to follow Your way. "Give us back the joy of Your salvation." ... "May our prayers, sacrifices and almsgiving be with cheerful, joyful hearts." "A willing spirit sustain in us."

We live in a world of many voices and sounds of violence and hatred. Against words of anger, cursing, ridicule, threats, seal our lips, O God. But then, "Open our lips and our mouths to proclaim your praise"; to speak words of comfort, consolation, hope to all. "Then you will be pleased with our sacrifices, our (Lenten) offerings."

Amen.

Father Robert Jones







*Please remember EMMITT ILLINGWORTH and HENRY FERRELL, two of our friends, both of whom died in recent weeks.*

Emmitt was a talented carpenter who first came to Unity Acres in June of 2003, and who served here for a time as one of our staff members during the latter part of 2006 and early 2007. Emmitt died at home in Oswego on December 22, 2008. He was fifty years old. His funeral was conducted in Brownville, where he will be buried in the spring.

“...We look not to what is seen, but to what is unseen; for what is seen is transitory, but what is unseen is eternal. For we know that if our earthly dwelling, a tent, should be destroyed, we have a building from God, a dwelling not made with hands, eternal in Heaven.”

*(2 Corinthians 4,18 – 5,1)*

Henry, known to us as “Hank”, had been a resident of Unity Acres, off and on, since 1970 until November 2006, when he was admitted to Sunrise Nursing Home in Oswego. Henry was a thoughtful, gentle man ... and known as a sharp pinochle player. He died on January 6 at Oswego Hospital. His funeral was conducted in our Sacred Heart Chapel in the company of family and friends.

*THESE MEN WILL BOTH BE MISSED. PLEASE KEEP THEM IN YOUR PRAYERS.*

