

Public Lives

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Kenosis: The message of Christmas

I grew up believing that Christmas is a time of joy, merriment, and love – but never quite knowing why the birth of the infant Jesus in a barn should occasion such sentiments. I learned that this was not an ordinary child -- that he is God's son sent into the world to save man, but I never quite understood why man needed to be saved in the first place. The meanings that this story held for me faded as I got older. The coming of Christmas became no more than a prelude to the New Year, a welcome break from daily routine just before the year finally comes to an end. Like a clever adult, I began to think of Christmas as nothing more than a time set aside for children.

The message of Christmas has however returned to me since encountering the Greek word "kenosis," which leapt like an early Christmas gift from Gianni Vattimo's book "Belief." The dictionary defines this word to mean the act of "emptying." In Christian theology, it refers to the voluntary act of abasement by which God the Son becomes man. Not being a theologian, I turned to my younger brother, Fr. Ambo David, who is a biblical scholar and knows Greek, to shed some light on the significance of this unique word. Specifically, I asked: what is God "emptying" by becoming man? And why would that be a momentous event for Christians?

Our discussions have deepened my appreciation for what my brother does as a hermeneuticist of the Scripture. I can only attempt to synthesize here what I take to be the product of a fusion of horizons – mine from postmodernism and sociology, his from hermeneutics and theology. By deciding to become man, God emptied himself of all divine powers so that He could properly become of this world, in a word -- secular. By becoming man, his life became finite, and He proved this by dying on the cross. This suggests, Vattimo argues, that secularity is the true destination of Christianity.

This exploration, to my great astonishment, ironically led me back to the writings of that sharp anti-Christ – Friedrich Nietzsche. It was he

who took up the famous formulation “God is dead” and wove a whole philosophy around it. He wrote: “After Buddha was dead, his shadow was still shown for centuries in a cave – a tremendous, gruesome shadow. God is dead; but given the way of men, there may still be caves for thousands of years in which his shadow will be shown. And we – we still have to vanquish his shadow too.” This oft-quoted line from the German philosopher is usually taken to be emblematic of his nihilistic philosophy, the sustained questioning of all that hitherto has been valued, and a declaration that man must strive to be the inventor of his own morality. Reading these lines, I have always been convinced that Nietzsche was merely using God as a metaphor for Universal Truth.

“Let us beware,” Nietzsche writes, “of saying there are laws in nature. There are only necessities: there is nobody who commands, nobody who obeys, nobody who trespasses. Once you know that there are no purposes, you also know that there is no accident; for it is only beside a world of purposes that the word ‘accident’ has meaning... .When will all these shadows of God cease to darken our minds? When will we complete our de-deification of nature? When may we begin to ‘naturalize’ humanity in terms of a pure, newly discovered, newly redeemed nature?”

Ahead of his time, Nietzsche sensed that the old certainties, including those of science, are either dead or dying. Nothing stands any longer as a stable measure of truth, justice, or beauty. Kenosis has thus come to mean secularization in all its open-endedness. God has finally let go of His own creation. He has given man the freedom to be alone in the world. But as a parting gift, He has sent his only begotten son to the world -- not to serve as God on earth, but to be the exemplar of a human being; not as a master, but as a friend.

I love this message. It tells the story of a God of love rather than of a God of Truth or Power. It resonates well with the mood of our times -- with what one writer has called “the dissolution of the markers of certainty,” and with the openness to paradox and indeterminacy that living in today’s world seems to require of us. The growth of this openness has, of course, been very uneven. Many people become disoriented by the erasure of the old symbols of authority. They seek easy closures by recourse to authority. In their everyday lives, they

clamor for an all-knowing Big Brother to tell them how they should live their lives. In politics, they gravitate around strongmen who could provide willful leadership. They find ideological refuge in various forms of fundamentalism. They look for first principles rather than for practical solutions to changing problems.

When God emptied Himself of all powers over our world, we became free to define our mode of being, to choose our own meanings, and to establish the rules that will govern our relationships with one another and with the world. Nothing else should henceforth constrain us except the power of our imagination.

Yet the old metaphysical shadows continue to stalk us. Even as we are already shaping ourselves in limitless ways, our minds cannot seem to grasp the message of kenosis. As Nietzsche wrote: "This tremendous event is still on its way, still wandering; it has not yet reached the ears of men. Lightning and thunder require time; the light of the stars requires time; deeds though done still require time to be seen and heard. This deed is still more distant from them than the most distant stars – and yet they have done it themselves."

A meaningful Christmas to one and all!

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