

Sermon for April 20, 2008
Reading: John 14:1-14
Rev. Curt Anderson
“In the Beauty of the Lilies”

As I was driving into work Friday morning, the various radio stations I listen to in the car all decided to play Curt's Greatest Hits – music by Bobby Darin, Ray Charles, Led Zeppelin, Harry Belafonte. Even WORT, whose button I pushed by mistake, played a beautiful Andante movement from a Beethoven Piano Sonata.

Hearing good music that I really like is a wonderful way to start the day. It draws me toward the events and activities of that day with energy and hope. Something about the beauty of music kind of entices me into the day.

In the beauty of the lilies Christ was born across the sea, with a glory in his bosom that transfigures you and me. That line, from Julia Ward Howe's hymn which a magazine editor entitled “The Battle Hymn of the Republic,” has always appealed to me. It is the beginning of the last stanza. When the hymn is sung what-I- believe-to-be correctly, these words are sung more softly, and ever-so-slightly more slowly, than the preceding stanzas.

Of course, we are not singing that hymn today. Most of the images are much too martial. They imply a view of God's actions in the world that seem widely at variance with the life and teaching, the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

But that line is compelling: *In the beauty of the lilies Christ was born across the sea, with a glory in his bosom that transfigures you and me.* It connects the appearance of Christ with beauty – with a compelling beauty and glory that are so much a part of him that they entice and lead us toward transformation.

It's not often that people talk about the beauty and glory of Christ being so compelling that we are enticed into change in his image. Yet Christ welcoming the children has always seemed to me to be a beautiful symbol of what Jesus' ministry was about. And the compassion in his healings – I'm sure when those healings occurred, you could see the beauty of that compassion in his face.

There is another beautiful image I would like to tell you about. When I was on sabbatical 20 months ago, I went to Colmar, France to see the Isenheim Altarpiece. Created by Matthias Grunewald in 1515 for St. Anthony's Hospice in Isenheim, Germany, the central work of the altarpiece is Christ crucified. It is the most gruesome image of the Crucifixion I have ever seen.

But one of the side panels of the Altarpiece is the Resurrection. As the soldiers on guard duty are falling to the ground, Christ rises – almost rockets – out of the tomb: his hands raised in Benediction, a gentle smile on his face.

I wanted to put an image of that in your bulletins today, but we couldn't get a good enough copy to do it; so I've put a couple of enlarged ones up on the back wall by the refreshment table. They're not very good, and Christ's face is almost invisible; but if you look at one from a distance, you might get an inkling of the compelling beauty of the painting, to which I am referring.

The contrast between the Crucifixion and the Resurrection in the Isenheim Altarpiece is mirrored by 2 other paintings I saw that same trip. Picasso's “Guernica” is possibly the best artistic representation of the horrors of war that there is.

Painted in 1937 in response to the Nazi and Fascist bombing of a small, Basque town in the Spanish Pyrenees, “Guernica” has become an iconic representation of the horror of all war.

9 years later, in 1946, WW II was ended, most of Europe was free, and Picasso had a new lover. Though his beloved Spain was still ruled by the dictator Franco, life felt good for Picasso. He lived in the sunny climes of the French Riviera, in Antibes. His paintings showed that sunny disposition.

One of them is entitled *La Joie de Vivre*, “The Joy of Life.” There is a poster print of that on an easel by the refreshment table. See if it doesn’t fairly cry out to you: *Praise the Lord, O my soul.... Behold the Beauty of the Lord.... Strength and beauty are in God’s world.* I know Picasso considered himself non-religious, even anti-religious. Still,... look at the work.

Stated openly, I believe the beauty of Christ’s life in its entirety, and the beauty of God’s world, draw us toward the goodness, and the hope, and the love we find offered there.

I use the phrase beauty of God’s world, rather than referring only to the natural world; because I believe that part of the beauty of God’s world is seen when Christians emulate Christ’s behavior:

- by welcoming children, strangers, outcasts;
- by feeding the hungry and visiting the sick and imprisoned;
- by speaking the truth in a world ruled by lies;
- by standing up and saying No to violence: whether it happens across villages and countries in the Middle East, or in the privacy of our own living rooms;
- by giving generously for others, when the world calls us to spend and to hoard for ourselves.

The beauty of Christ’s life, of God’s world, draws us, entices us toward the goodness, hope and love we find in Jesus Christ. This beauty leads us toward the life Christ offers to all humankind.

Beautiful Savior. Beautiful Jesus. Those words are truer than we at first appreciate; and we understand them, I believe, through the passage in the gospel of John which we heard this morning.

The passage begins wonderfully: *Let not your hearts be troubled.... In my Father’s house there are many dwelling places (many mansions, in an older translation).... If I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and take you to myself; so that where I am, there you may be also.*

There is a depth of comfort, support and encouragement in what Jesus says. But then come contested words, words that are troubling to some: *I am the way, the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father but through me.*

You know the way some people will read this. *Verbal belief in Christ is necessary for salvation.*

All those who do not profess this verbal belief are damned.

But if you listened closely, you also know that’s not the way it has to be read.

Jesus Christ is the way. Welcoming the outcasts; giving generously; feeding and visiting the needy; saying No to violence wherever it is, outside us and within us; keeping the vows and promises we make – these are the ways of Christ.

Jesus Christ is the **truth**. When we resort to violence, we deny the **truth** of Christ. When we ignore the stranger and demean the outcast – listen to our national immigration debates, and listen to the way immigrants are being portrayed – when we demean the stranger, we deny the **truth** of Christ. When we give in a miserly, mean and parsimonious manner, we deny the **truth** of Christ.

Jesus Christ is the **life**. When we follow the way of Christ, in the truth of Christ, a life of hope is offered in the midst of despair.

A life of spiritual peace is offered even if our lives are surrounded by violence. A love so strong and deep is offered, we may be transformed in Christ's image.

The life of Christ is so filled with beauty and glory that we are invited and enticed through him to the magnificence and splendor of God's majesty.

And when we arrive at that great and good place, and find Christ standing before us and among us, to welcome us, simple verbal assent will be down the list of what mattered on our journeys.

Did you welcome the stranger and the outcast? Did you visit the sick and imprisoned? Did you give generously to feed and house the poor? Did you love enemies and make peace? Did you care for God's good creation? Did you speak the truth, in love.

These will be the questions that matter.
These will be the issues Jesus discusses with us, and with all humankind.

And the glory of his way, the beauty of his truth, the radiance of his life will still be drawing humankind to him.

In the beauty of the lilies Christ was born across the sea, with a glory in his bosom that transfigures you and me.

Beautiful Savior. Beautiful Jesus. May the beauty and glory of our Savior Jesus Christ lead us, guide us, and entice us into the life God offers to us, and to all.