

February 1, 2009

Fourth Sunday After the Epiphany, Year B (Mark 1:21-28)

All Saints' Episcopal Church, Atlanta, Ga.

The Rev'd John F. Herring, associate rector

A well known preacher once said, "Our disbelief in demons has not eliminated the problem of evil." We still have evil on our midst. I was told by a priest once: "Wherever one finds the Holy Spirit at work, evil is there working too, trying to undermine the fruits of the Spirit."

This past week I traveled to Ecuador in order to scout out and plan the upcoming Journey to Adulthood pilgrimage, which will take place in June. I traveled with some people from Youth World, a mission-based organization in Quito, looking at various pre-Christian and Christian sites, hoping to become familiar with the lay of the land and planning to plot out the course of the summer pilgrimage.

Ecuador has been part of the body of Christ for 500 years, yet there are so many reasons to oversee any fruits of the Spirit. The country has a history shaped by long periods of political and economic instability. Poverty is rampant in Ecuador. I did not see any place where poverty was not clearly visible. Domestic violence is endemic. Furthermore, the legacy of colonization has contributed to a mentality that accepts abuse and defeat. These are some, not all, of the reasons why Ecuadorians focus on Good Friday, not Easter. If you find yourself in Ecuador during Holy Week, you would see that an overwhelming majority observe Good Friday, but Easter is an afterthought. If we have an issue of jumping to the resurrection while skipping the cross, theirs is the opposite. Many never get to the resurrection. Even our own church has issues. The Episcopal Church has a diocese in Ecuador, which has been struggling with severe issues in the last decade.

After my arrival, it was not long before I had a hard time figuring out how I could lead a pilgrimage here. Finding the spiritually uplifting, the good, was tough for me. Adding to this, I did not speak the language and I felt like an outsider based on my skin, my clothes, my hair. I was well out of my comfort zone. I was in the square of Old Town and I turned to my guide saying, "I want to take a picture but I do not want to stand out." She said, "Trust me, you already stand out." I spent all of Tuesday and most of Wednesday struggling to adjust as we toured Quito and the surrounding countryside.

For our last stop on Wednesday, we went to look at a pre-Incan sight near Cayambe, north of Quito. We were in a Chevy SUV, traveling on a series of unmarked dirt roads, in a very rural area. The guides were all unsure of how to get where we needed to go, because it was not a known tourist destination. Along they way, when we spotted another person, the driver would stop and shout out in Spanish, asking in which direction these ruins were, each time receiving

reassurance we were on the right path. Further up the mountain we climbed, through thousands of eucalyptus trees, past sheep, dogs, cows, and the occasional dilapidated cinderblock house. We were all a little anxious. My anxiety level was rising too. I had no idea where we were, what we were going to see, or how this all might fit into our pilgrimage. Up we went to the top of the mountain where there was a community of indigenous Kayambi, the descendants of people that predated the Incas. It was a rural farming community on the mountain top. As we drove along we could see the cinderblock houses with tin roofs, some dotting the open landscape, most grouped together slightly above our position. We drove past a little shrine on the dirt road, a small white A-frame on a post, with a cross on the top, beads, candles and a figurine inside. I think it was Mary. We came to a stop near the end of the road, houses up the slope and a group of people down slope, farming. There were mostly women there, all dressed in traditional dress, blue skirts, white blouses, green shawls, rows of neck beads and a round hat with a short brim all the way around, something like a fedora, but not quite. There were children there some working, some playing; a couple toddlers were nursing. The women and the one young man in the group were harvesting potatoes out of the dark rich soil, which contrasted with all the green on the mountain. They had dark skin and black hair. All of their hands were very dark from the rich soil. We approached the group and it was obvious that we were outsiders and our presence was not well received. One of our guides began speaking to a woman there, who turned out to be the wife of the community president. She had the final say as to whether we could explore the site we came to see, which happened to be on their land. She agreed to let us pass, but made it known that any future visits would require permission and this matter would be up for discussion with the community president. After we received permission, one of the guides continued to speak to the woman. He asked what they charge for their potatoes. He was told they were not for sale; they belonged to the community for the purpose of feeding their community.

We then walked about three hundred yards out to the site, learning more about the indigenous Kayambi culture that existed before the Incan invasion. On our way back to our SUV, we stopped to say thank you. The woman we were dealing with asked us if we ate potatoes. Our guide said "si." Then the women who were done picking potatoes by this time started talking in their native Quichua language, giggling, amongst themselves, and the children all stared at us. One of the women then pulled a plate out from under a blanket or sack. She came over to us and the plate was filled with hot, fresh potatoes. It was a gift. It was an amazing gift. We were floored. Of course we ate them, first out of obligation, because we wanted to be good guests. But the potatoes were so good, so fresh.

The energy level between both parties changed at that point. We offered to help them bring their potatoes up the slope for them. They agreed, so our guide fetched the truck, we loaded it with the potatoes. The kids jumped in for a ride in the back. They were all smiles. It took two trips to get all the sacks of potatoes to their destination. We said goodbye and they gave us more. We even picked up the name of some of our hosts.

That was an amazing moment. Our anxieties were gone. We felt lighter coming down the mountain and we talked about what an amazing experience it was to receive that gift from the indigenous people. We felt nourished, lifted up, rejuvenated.

I know that my faith is different from the Kayambi on several levels, mostly because of cultural differences. Our differences did not matter. That event was the turning point for my trip. These rural people with seemingly less than me did something. They shifted my eyes from focusing on the bad to seeing the good. The negativity holding me back was driven away. Up until that point, I missed the good before me. Now it was easier for me to see. The rest of my trip I could see the resilience of the people of Ecuador, who despite all they had been through, still have faith. I could see that the church catholic, despite its human flaws, still was bearing good fruit. I had a greater appreciation for the mission workers who were my guides. They experience many hardships, yet they persevere, advancing the Gospel. Our Church, the Episcopal Church, despite its flaws, is moving forward because of good people with strong faith who refuse to quit in the face of adversity.

Evil often is loud and in your face. It wants to look big and permanent. Evil will try to subdue your psyche. There are many pockets in the world with intractable problems: poverty, crime, abuse. These and other problems cloud our vision and make us forget what we heard in the Gospel today, that Jesus drives away the loud demons, Jesus has authority over evil. Evil can obscure the good right in front of us. However, if we stick with it, we will be reminded. We will be fed. God will open our eyes, sometimes in the most unexpected places through the most unexpected people.