

January 26, 2014

TEXT: Colossians 1:15-23

TITLE: The Song of Christ

Who was Jesus Christ? That is a surprisingly difficult question to answer. One of the most famous ways to describe Jesus comes from the gospel of John: *In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God and the Word was God.* But I wonder if there is another metaphor instead of “word” that can be used to describe Jesus – something richer and more vibrant. Recently I pulled out a piece written by the 20th century American composer Samuel Barber. As I was playing it, I began to think of it as a song describing Christ. Now, Barber didn’t think this, so everything I’m going to say about this piece can only be blamed on me, not Samuel Barber. So imagine if John’s gospel opened with *In the beginning was the Song, and the Song was with God and the Song was God.* And imagine if this was Christ’s song. (Play Barber’s *Excursions op. 20 #3*)

Every Christmas we tell the story of Jesus as Immanuel, God-with-us, the one who came down to earth. In this piece, the left hand plays a simple, plodding pattern of eight eighth-notes per measure. That can represent our humanity which Christ joined at the incarnation. The right hand has the melody – a lovely, heaven-sent melody. But there’s one problem. What is heaven’s favorite number? Well, how many days of creation were there? Seven. Seven and eight don’t line up. Only the first notes of the measure come together; the rest stagger in between each other. Both hands are constantly in tension. Yet that is the way the song goes.

How did we get to talking about Jesus as being both human and divine? Well, it took a while. At first, it was dangerous to talk about Jesus at all. For years after his death, the Christians were persecuted – cast out from Jewish synagogues; distrusted and marginalized in cities throughout the Roman Empire. About 35 years after the death of Christ, Nero blamed the Christians for the burning of Rome and persecuted them. Persecution happened again in 192 AD; then in 250 AD under Emperor Valerian; and in 303 AD under Emperor Diocletian. Still the Christian faith survived. The song kept being sung – often in hiding; taught to children and their children’s children until a miracle happened. Emperor Constantine made Christianity the official religion of Rome. In 324 AD, he passed the Edict of Toleration; finally bishops and leaders of the Christian church were free to gather and talk about this faith in which they believed.

Their first gathering was the Council of Nicaea (325 AD). There they talked mostly about the Trinity – how God was known to us as three persons: God the Creator, Jesus Christ the Savior, and the Holy Spirit. Three persons, one nature. Next the church’s attention focused on Jesus. How were they to talk about Christ, who was called Son of Man and Son of God? Every fifty or sixty years, another council was called to discuss this. In 381 they met in Constantinople; in 431 in Ephesus, and finally in 451 AD in Chalcedon.

Back to our song metaphor: Though we started out with a simple tune built around eight notes in the left hand and seven notes in the right hand, soon the song gets more complicated. Like words from church councils, more notes are added in, as if extra notes would finally get the two hands playing Jesus' "song" to coincide. But as the right hand gets more complicated, the left hand also adds notes to its plodding pattern, so that we end up with 16 against 9 – and still nothing lines up neatly or easily. This keeps happening: 7 in right hand, 9 in the left hand; 12 in the right hand, 10 in the left hand. Everything gets more complicated until the original pattern simply returns for four brief measures and everyone has a chance to catch their breath.

When Pope Leo I gathered the church in Chalcedon in 451, the main topic was how to understand Jesus as both Son of God and Son of Man. In these debates, there were people of good faith called Ebionites, who insisted that there is only one God; therefore Jesus was a human who simply had special gifts given to him by God but who would be revealed as the Holy One when the world comes to an end in the Last Days. In Barber's piano piece, for me this is represented when the melody moves from the right hand to the left hand. No matter what is going on in the treble clef, the bass clef left hand is adamantly playing the song of Jesus, trying to literally ground him in the ways of the earth.

On the other side, there were people of good faith called Docetists, who believed that Jesus was fully divine, and that he only appeared to have a fleshly body so as to talk, eat and walk among us. For me, in the piano piece, this is represented when the right hand yanks the melody back with complicated chords and then turns up the volume – since in any argument, if you can't convince someone of your position, the next logical step is to start shouting and drown out their objections. For eight measures, both hands play the divine, 7-note melody in loud unison. To me, it is similar to the evangelical movement of the last half century that has insisted that Jesus is the only way to salvation and either you sing along with their version of Christ's song or you're left out of the heavenly choir altogether. But soon the unison pattern starts to fall apart. Dissonance enters in. Questions are raised about this stark version of a holy Savior. Once again we struggle with knowing what we are supposed to believe.

The Council at Chalcedon did its best to answer the questions of faith by not choosing one side or the other, but by lifting up the truth of both positions. Yes, Jesus was fully human – possessing of human emotions and feelings; limited in his human knowledge as all finite humans are limited. He was a humble man, a wise teacher, a living being who died on the cross. And yes, Jesus was fully divine. He cast out demons; he healed broken human beings and restored people to life. As Colossians says, "in him the fullness of God was pleased to dwell and through him God was pleased to reconcile to Godself all things." That is not a biological statement; it is a relationship statement – singing a hymn about connections, flesh and spirit, earth and heaven, grounded in love.

The Council of Chalcedon did not stop people from struggling to understand how Jesus Christ can be fully human and fully divine. It took almost 500 years after Christ for Nicaea and Chalcedon to help Christians begin to learn how to talk about Jesus. Five hundred years after that, the entire church split into the Western Catholic and Eastern Orthodox branches. Five hundred years after that, Martin Luther tacked his 95 Theses on the Wittenberg Cathedral doors and the Protestant Reformation again challenged how we are to worship Christ. And now, here we are in 2014. Three years from now will mark the 500th anniversary of Luther's Reformation. All around us, the church is struggling with relevance and self-preservation. People still ask the question: How are we to understand this Jesus Christ whom you worship?

Although I've followed a calling to be a preacher, I don't think it is possible to fully answer the question about Jesus using words. As a musician, I know well that there are things that art, poetry, dance, and music express that cannot be captured in words. The end of Barber's piece is an example of this. After all the fuss and complications along the way, the quiet song of seven notes against eight notes is heard once more, and it actually seems to fit together quite nicely. No longer does it feel necessary to dissect it and analyze it; both voices come together to sing a song, or as it were "tell a story." And pleasing to me, the piece ends with a special cadence. For music majors, it concludes with a subdominant moving to tonic – a IV chord resolving to a I chord. For non-music majors, this progression is what is familiar to our ears as an "Amen."

If the concept of Jesus being fully human and fully divine is complicated, the fault does not lie with God. Isn't it better to allow a bit of heavenly mystery to be "pleased to dwell in us" than it is to sulk away insisting on human standards of certainty? Isn't it better to sing a song whose beauty exceeds our capacity to fully understand it than to remain deaf to any and all melodies of heaven? In the beginning was the Song, and the Song was sung to us, given to us – divine, human, mysterious yet loving. We are choir members learning this song and teaching this song. And in doing that, our lives are made whole; our lives become part of God's musical score; and thus our lives will always conclude with a loving Amen.

Let us pray:

Lord Christ, one of the least original prayers we pray is when we say that we don't understand you – that we don't grasp your being, your humanity, your divinity, your loving spirit. At some point we all struggle with understanding you, even accepting you. Like the man in the gospel, we pray, "Lord I believe; help my unbelief." In your response, instead of trying to explain things to us, you simply say over and over again, "Be not afraid. For I am with you, even to the end of the age." With those words, with that lullaby of grace, we are comforted. Thank you, Lord Christ, Son of God, Son of Humanity. In your name we pray. Amen.