

April 18, 2008 – University Lutheran Church, Cambridge MA – Thomas B. Chittick
In Memory of Krister Stendahl

2 Corinthians 3:18

And all of us, with unveiled faces, seeing the glory of the Lord as though reflected in a mirror, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another, for this comes from the Lord, the Spirit.

Men vi alla som med avhöljt ansikte återspegla Herrens härlighet, vi förvandlas till hans avbilder, i det vi stiga från den ena härligheten till den andra, såsom när den Herre verkar, som själv är ande.

Or as Peterson's translation/paraphrase has it:

...we are transfigured much like the Messiah, our lives gradually becoming brighter and more beautiful as God enters our lives and we become like him.

Thirty-five.

That's the estimated number of people who would have first heard Paul's letter read in their little house church in Corinth. And that would have been perhaps the largest of those first century churches. The early Christian communities were dependent on the use of the largest home of one of their members.

Thirty-five people in a major city surrounded by a huge array of competing religions and in years to follow Paul's letters, persecutions.

Thirty-five people. And yet that letter they received from their itinerant founder has long since been added to the lexicon of the most exalted of religious verses, of spiritual imagination, and of literary beauty.

Thirty-five people, a tiny band, and with the flourish of a pen and the dazzling use of metaphor Paul has placed them at the fountain of original mystery and upon the heights of Mt. Sinai – in the company of Moses, whose face was veiled while theirs in Corinth were unveiled: seeing the glory of God in Christ.

This was Krister's favorite NT passage, the one he said he hoped he'd have before his mind's eye as he prepared to die. And I'd guess he'd call the passage a passage of supreme chutzpah. You know how he liked to throw in a little slang in the middle of his theological musings. What else would you call inviting those thirty-five people to imagine themselves the equals of Moses and the visionaries of glory?

And Krister, by choosing this text for his own funeral wants us thereby to join that band of thirty-five with the same imagination, trust and holy chutzpah.

We are here gathered to bid him farewell and to offer up prayers of gratitude for his life. But we also stand here upon the rim of death: at the edge of no-being-ness, of seeming extinction, by a box of bones believing, appearances notwithstanding, that he, Krister, is being transformed, as Paul would say it, from one degree of glory to another

The born again crowd has it only fractionally right. It isn't that we have to be born again, true enough as that is, but that we ARE being born again and again and again; one degree of glory to another.

That's the journey of faith.

And that is where Krister is right now on but one more bend in the road for him: glory-to-glory.

Which we see now only as in a mirror.... reflected.

April 18, 2008 – University Lutheran Church, Cambridge MA – Thomas B. Chittick
In Memory of Krister Stendahl

First century mirrors were simply well hammered metal. Imagine trying to see your face in a pewter dish. So the imagery here is absolutely perfect. For we only see the outline of things; the intimations of the divine. We see imprecisely, out of the corner of our eyes, so often retrospectively.

He, Krister, believed this and invites us to believe it too, that he is being transformed —now — from glory to glory. Death, another bend in the road.

Thirty-five believing they were like Moses. Because? Because Jesus is the one in whose life and death the broken icon of God has been restored. The image of God in which we were fashioned is being put back together. And we, in him, are having that image in us transformed; restored.

For Krister, the journey is beyond our knowing; for he is now upon that “farther shore.”

But he left a note behind: a single verse from an ancient letter.

And in effect it says, to be a believer is to be a work in progress.

It, faith, is not about arrival. It’s about a road. It’s about a “way.”

It’s about resurrection. Not first of all in “time after time,” but now, in the time of our lives. And indeed “having the time of our lives.” Remember how Krister would translate John’s Jesus, “I have come that you might have life and have it galore.”

Now is when the broken image of God, the fractured icon of God is being refashioned and restored in the image of “the man for others.”

And in that restoration we see glory. The veil is lifted. Faces shine like the countenance of Moses.

Later this spring no doubt there will be fulsome campus tributes and memorials to Krister: to his teaching, his leadership a HDS and the diocese of Stockholm, to his ecumenical vision and work, to his interfaith outlook and outreach.

We today gather under a different banner. Joanne said it best I think. “How are you doing” I asked earlier this week. “Well,” she said, “I feel just the way I did when my grandmother died.”

Yes, this is the place, when church is really church, that the intimate and the public touch ever so gently, beside the table of the Lamb.

Husband, father, grand and great grandfather, neighbor, friend, shelter volunteer, church companion — Krister was dear to so many here; as dear as a grandfather. Perhaps no public remembrance of the man will be as tender as this one.

And if he has anything to do with what the many send offs are about it will be this: that at his passing we were told by him to see the very shining of God in this place, and in one –another’s faces even as we saw shining in his.

For God is restoring the divine icon in each of us through Him who was raised from the dead and in whose rising we are being made new day upon day.

Rev. Thomas B. Chittick served as pastor of University Lutheran Church and Lutheran campus pastor to Harvard University from 1993 to 2003. He is currently pastor of Trinity Lutheran Church, Westbrook, Maine.