

Insight

I wish that for just one time you could stand inside my shoes,
And for that one moment, I could be you.
I wish that for just one time you could stand inside my shoes.
You'd know what a drag it is to see you.

– Bob Dylan, "Positively 4th Street"

That's Bob Dylan's photographic negative of an often-expressed sentiment. The Scottish poet Robert Burns spun it more positively when he wrote,

O wad some Power the giftie gie us
To see oursels as ithers see us!

Confucius made it reciprocal, "Never do to others what you would not like them to do to you," and Jesus, of course, took it on the offensive when he taught, "As ye would that men should do to you, do ye also to them likewise."

Well, of course it's a nice trick if you can pull it off. The isolation of our sin nature makes any real identification with others difficult. Now, of all things, science has found a way to help. Swedish researchers have rigged a set of goggles that cause one person to see from the perspective of another. When the two subjects touch hands, the illusion takes charge over reality. From that point forward, Person A flinches when someone prods Person B. One individual teleports into the mind and body of another.

Psychologists call this the Proteus effect, after a shape-shifting Greek god of the same name. They see great potential for race relations, marriage counseling, even office politics.

Advent is a good time to remember that, like all good ideas, God thought this one up first. An ancient hymn recorded in Philippians 2.5-10 tells us that God the Son did more than dress up in a man-suit or strap on God-goggles to get a gander at a human's-eye view. He embraced our very form and likeness. He hit rock-bottom at birth and managed to sink lower in death: He started out as a slave and ended up as a democide. He knew humans have a hard time sympathizing with those below them, so he started at the bottom to actualize his empathy.

In an important sense, Christmas comforts us with the reminder that we truly are not alone, Emmanuel "God is with us". In an equally important sense, it challenges us with that same awareness. What peculiar perspective does Christ call me to adopt? Perhaps the cross I carry is the chair where I sit knee-to-knee with another until her world becomes my own.

Here's Looking At You,

Doug