

On the Sunday before Christmas, I went to the Lutheran church in my town for a special occasion. The faith community there was celebrating the 60th anniversary of the ordination of an outstanding leader.

His name is Krister Stendahl, and he has a wide reputation as a scholar and pastor. Formerly professor of New Testament at Harvard Divinity School, he also served as dean there for 11 years.

In the middle 1980s he became bishop of Stockholm in his native Sweden and from that position exercised a strong influence on the church world-wide. His preaching, lecturing, and writing showed his firm commitment to understanding between Jewish and Christian communities, as well as among various Christian churches.

Bishop Stendahl was born in 1921 and is now supposedly retired. However, he continues to draw on his expert knowledge of the New Testament and his wide pastoral experience as he teaches the meaning of the Christian tradition. He is widely esteemed for his insights into sacred scripture; his sympathetic appreciation of traditions not his own have also won for him a considerable following.

At his anniversary celebration, the bishop stepped to the pulpit, looming tall though somewhat slowed by physical disability. Until he smiles, he has an austere look that reminds me of pastors shown in the films of his fellow Swede, Ingmar Bergman. I think especially of "Winter Light" where one such pastor is portrayed as struggling with faith. (Incidentally, Krister Stendahl once told me that Bergman's grandfather was his Sunday school teacher when he was growing up.)

For his text on the Sunday of his anniversary, Bishop Stendahl drew his material from the Gospel of Matthew. The Christmas story there focuses, not directly on the birth of Jesus, but rather on Joseph. Though not a single word of Joseph is quoted in the Scriptures, he is presented as what the preacher called "the golden link to David's royal line." To the Gospel writer, Joseph has unique importance because of keeping hope alive through the generations since the time of King David.

Christmas, to Stendahl, means "that God becomes most divine." It also is the time "when God becomes most human." Thus divinity and humanity touch and we receive back the divinity we lost through the sin of Adam and Eve. This is the root meaning of the Christmas event as understood by the Christian tradition.

Bishop Stendahl remembers seeing, in the south of France, a statue of Joseph carrying Jesus. This serves as a reminder that Joseph is essential to the story of the mending of creation and the hope of the kingdom of heaven.

But, though Joseph is essential, he is not indispensable. God could have done it a different way. In fact, in all things God does not need man, the bishop insists, but nonetheless chooses us for His purposes.

The preacher then broadened the message from Joseph to all people. This is the human

condition, he suggested, being essential but not indispensable. That brings great dignity to us human beings as we offer service to God and one another.

Being essential means, in Stendahl's words, "no one can be me but me." Each of us has a uniqueness that confers importance on us, an importance particular to my person.

The bishop sees himself in this way "after 60 years in the priesthood, for which I humbly thank God." He is filled with gratitude for his own gifts: being called to serve during a long life, and being essential though never indispensable.

He regards John the Baptist as the same kind of model as St. Joseph. John was the one who said of Christ: "He must increase and I must decrease."

I felt joy in seeing a person of my acquaintance revered by the people of his faith community and celebrated for who he is. It was easy to join in the worship of a church not my own for this special occasion and to pray in thanksgiving for God's blessing on this special man.

Joy was also my emotion as I walked away from church, that morning, reflecting on the status that I share with every other person. I also, like you, am essential to God, despite not ever being indispensable.

Richard Griffin