One lesson we learn during the course of our lives is that things aren’t always as they seem. God has a way of sneaking up on us at times through the most unlikely of people and taking us by surprise. We think we are in the presence of someone who is damaged or is something of a distraction from the more important things in our lives, and suddenly they are transformed into someone who is aglow with holiness, a bearer of God’s presence. I experienced this quite powerfully a few years back.

Sr. Wilma Ross and I were visiting an elderly woman at an adult day care center named Bridget. She was suffering from dementia. Much of our visit went as you might expect with a person who was in many ways out of touch with what was going on around her. Well, towards the end of our time with her we celebrated the anointing of the sick. And after she was anointed, Bridget looked at us and said, “Should I cry now?”

When she said this, Sr. Wilma and I looked at each other. We had both been taken by surprise by what she said and were deeply moved. And we were both thinking the same thing. This person who seemed damaged and out of touch with reality somehow had realized that she had just received a precious gift from God – something so precious that it seemed the right response would be to weep. And suddenly Bridget was transformed into someone who was aglow with holiness. Sr. Wilma and I both had a strong feeling that we were in the presence of God – that God had reached out and touched us through her.

I think that something similar was going on in today’s gospel. Mary, a fourteen-year-old Jewish girl had just made a fifty-mile trip to see a relative who was in seclusion and really didn’t want to be seen by anyone. Now in ancient middle-eastern cultures, young women didn’t just up and go on road trips. They really didn’t go out in public much until they were married. This means that Mary’s excursion was unusual and quite unexpected. I imagine her parents were totally taken by surprise when she asked if she could go visit Elizabeth. I mean, they were related, but they must not have been that close because Mary didn’t even know Elizabeth was pregnant until the angel Gabriel told her. And at this point Elizabeth had been pregnant for six months! But somehow, Mary had pulled it off, and convinced her parents let her go.

Now Elizabeth also must have been surprised when Mary turned up at her place. And my guess is that she wasn’t all that thrilled about it. Remember, Elizabeth was an old woman, well beyond the normal child-bearing years. And to keep people from talking about her, she had gone into seclusion. So my guess is that when Mary showed up at her gate her initial response was not, “O goody, company!” It was probably more like, “What’s she doing here? Nobody’s even supposed to know about this!”

But that’s the way it is in life. Company comes at inconvenient times. People call when we really don’t want to see anyone. And when this happens, initially we see that person who has come to us as a burden rather than a blessing. But there are times when how we see that person changes quite quickly, and in unexpected ways. While Elizabeth may have initially thought, “O God, the last thing I need to be doing now is entertaining a teenager!” when she heard Mary’s greeting something totally unexpected happened. The baby stirred in Elizabeth’s womb – and much more forcefully than usual. It seemed like the baby she was carrying was responding to Mary’s greeting – like he had begun to do a celebration dance in her womb. He seemed to know something that Elizabeth didn’t. And indeed he did. It had been prophesied that God’s Spirit would be with her child while he was still in the womb. And so it was! John was celebrating in her womb the visitation of his Savior – at the Spirit’s prompting.

So, while usually, the movement of this child in her womb was experienced by Elizabeth as something quite ordinary, this time it was different. This time her child’s movement somehow opened
Elizabeth to the great mystery that was unfolding before her. Moved by her child’s movement, Elizabeth was also opened to the Spirit’s presence. And inspired by that same Spirit, Elizabeth suddenly knew what only God could know – that the young woman standing before her was also with child – and that it was the special child that they all had been waiting for. Suddenly she found herself blurting out, “Blessed are you among women and blessed is the fruit of your womb. And how does this happen, that the mother of my Lord should come to me?” This young woman who at first appeared to Elizabeth as something of a nuisance, was suddenly transformed before her very eyes into the bearer of God’s presence.

I remember walking down the aisle in church one day and a little girl pointed at me and said to her mother, “Look, mom, there’s Jesus!” Now her mother quickly corrected her (a little too quickly I thought!) saying, “That’s not Jesus, that’s Fr. Rod.” And I have to admit that this also was my initial response to this child’s words. I found myself thinking, “If this kid only knew what I was really like, she wouldn’t be confusing me with Jesus!”

But as I remembered this child’s enthusiasm when she first saw me and thought she was seeing Jesus, I realized that there was a truth to her words – a truth wonderful enough to make me tremble, or to weep like Bridget. And this child was suddenly transformed before my eyes into an angel bearing glad tidings. She had seen something about me that I don’t often see about myself. For you see, by uniting with our humanity in the womb of Mary, God has embraced all humankind. In other words, this child of hers -- Jesus -- is Emmanuel – God with us.

This means that when we see any human being we should see Jesus. We should see him regardless of what that particular human being looks like or happens to be doing. When we look at another human being in light of God’s embracing of humankind in the womb of Mary, we should see what that child saw when she looked at me – we should see Jesus. We should see Jesus, not first of all because that person is doing something good and holy, but because something good and holy has been done for that person. In Jesus, God has wrapped his divine life around all humankind.

This is the reason we are to treat all people with civility and respect, even when they are not civil and respectful. For we see something that those who don’t know the mystery we celebrate here cannot see. We see what that child saw when she looked at me and said, “Look mom, there’s Jesus!”

Of course, we all know that it’s not always easy to see people this way – especially if they are people who do things that disturb us, or people who sometimes make us want to respond as perhaps Elizabeth responded when she first caught sight of that teenage girl coming her way – “Oh, God, what’s she doing here?” But what the feast of Christmas we are preparing to celebrate tells us in so many ways, is that the people we struggle with the most are no less embraced by God in Christ than are the holiest, most likeable people we know. And when we get this we will begin to see even the most unlikely people as bearers of God’s presence. In them we will see Jesus.

Fr. Rod Damico
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