Seeing the unseen, hearing the unheard

Highland Views
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Guest columnist

"We were witnesses of what we did not wish to see..." This line from "Invisible Man," Ralph Ellison's powerful novel of personal revelation and injustice, offers a hint of what the book is really calling us to: to witness, to see what we don't really want to see. This has profound implications for the relevance or irrelevance of religious faith as we've known it. Since faith primarily concerns the "unseen," it must be asked how this applies to human beings who are overlooked or ignored.

Have you ever wondered why the Jesus story isn't about an incarnate deity sitting on a golden throne in a high palace wearing a beautiful robe and bejeweled crown? From that lofty position, he could have given commands and pronouncements for years and changed the world with every word. People would ascend to fall at his scented feet. Earthly kings and armies wouldn't dare challenge the rule of the King of Kings. No, this isn't the story. A poor child of teen parents who live in an oppressive Roman state grows up to be a wandering teacher among the poorest of the land. We could say he made the invisible visible, calling each one to be a witness, not so much of his greatness, but of their own.

Who or what did the Nazarene make visible or "materialize"? Was his concern primarily for the immaterial? If so, why materialize, become visible flesh and blood? Some will say it's because he was "sent for a purpose, God's plan of salvation; he had to live in order to die." However, why live a short life in a mortal human shell, spend precious hours teaching about ethical conduct, touching the untouchable, seeing the unseen, simply to fulfill his "true purpose" — giving up that compassionate life to please his Heavenly Parent?

These things are better left to the professional God-talkers (theologians). Staying with the theme of invisibility, Ralph Ellison's main character becomes a symbol for people whose lives are often short and suffused with suffering because they are not really seen for being human. They live without really being alive, at least in the sight of the proudly visible, the powerful who control the visible world.

But truth be told, no one, even the powerful, can control who is visible or valued, manage what is seen or goes unseen. They certainly try, but each person must decide, must choose to see, to manage their own field of vision, and, if it matters, to make themselves visible. And it's not only about visibility. Being visible is only the first step. Then the question becomes: visible for what, for whom? To be known, recognized, respected for being a unique individual with a name, face and life story.

The Invisible Man becomes a very visible figure in Harlem, a popular speaker for the "Brotherhood" consisting of both White and Black citizens. He

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presents their message of racial unity and the elevation of human rights, equality, justice. Gradually he learns he's being used by powerful Whites and other Blacks who've bought into a culture manipulated by Whites to retain power. In a sense, the Invisible Man becomes visible to himself as the circumstances reveal what is most hidden. Encountering a multi-faceted character named Rinehart causes him to face himself in the mirror of his own mind, to understand layers of visibility and influence. He sees there in a "rind" and a "heart." He asks himself: "What is real anyway?" Confronting what shields his self from others and even from himself, he tries to peel back the rind to the heart of life's contradictions: "Perhaps only the unbelievable could be believed. Perhaps the truth was always a lie."

Near the conclusion, the Invisible Man gets clarity. The thick fog of doubt clears enough for him to identify the illusions that have kept him invisible. Leaders of the Brotherhood "were blind, bat blind, moving only by the echoed sounds of their own voices. Here I had thought they accepted me because they felt that color made no difference, when in reality it made no difference because they didn't see either color or men." They were "each attempting to force his picture of reality upon me and neither giving a hoot in hell for how things looked to me." All these people had been using him — though not really him since they didn't care to know or truly see his humanity — so he came to a fundamental realization: "I now recognized my invisibility."

Ellison's character made their blindness visible, and in the darkness of their vision he saw his own invisibility — his invisibility became visible, at least to him. In a brilliant flash of self-empowerment he claims: "I'd make invisibility felt if not seen."

Do we dare to see, hear, feel?

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