

SEEING GOD IN THE WORLD

Robert Jones - Sunday, June 15, 2014

There are two important elements in today's gospel reading. First, what's called "the Great Commission." – "...[G]o and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,²⁰ and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you." Which lays the cornerstone of Christianity's evangelical aspect. The second element is the reference in the Great Commission to the three divine persons – the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. These three persons have come to be referred to as "the Trinity", and the Trinity forms such an important part of (at least mainstream) Christian doctrine that mainstream Christian churches set aside a special Sunday called Trinity Sunday. Today is Trinity Sunday. I originally intended to discuss the Trinity this morning and did much research and thinking about it. But earlier this week I decided that what I was coming up with was like what the playwright Tom Stoppard said of doctoral dissertations: they contain much that is worth writing but nothing much worth reading. I decided that I had much that was worth saying, but little worth hearing. So I'm not going to talk about the Trinity.

As to the Great Commission, many, many sermons have been preached on it, but I do not propose to preach another. Rather I want to spend some time talking about another topic, one we can get to from today's brief Old Testament reading, which describes God's creation of the world. The topic I want to address is God's role in the world. Big topic. I'm aiming at a sub-topic: how God's role in the world figures in our experience.

Let's get the ball rolling by briefly looking at Mary's discussion in her message last week.

You'll recall that Mary spoke of an interview with a Professor of Philosophy, Howard Wettstein, author of a book entitled "The Significance of Religious Experience"; in the interview Professor Wettstein drew a sharp distinction between the experience of God and beliefs and theories about God; he treasured the former but had little truck with the latter. But when pressed, he admitted to a tendency to believe that the object of his experience was a person but was uneasy about admitting it. He took refuge behind the notion that we "anthropomorphize" God in thinking about him while at the same time recognizing that, as regards the reality behind the experience, we are actually in over our heads and actually have no idea of what to say literally about the underlying reality.

I think that Wettstein needed a third notion to fit between religious experience on the one hand and belief on the other -- the notion of "seeing-as"; in religious experience we "see" the object of our experience "as" a person. Do we then believe it's a person? Wettstein won't go here. But to correctly describe his experience he need not. He has the experience of communicating with another person; he sees the experience this way; as to what is happening in "reality" he has no notion and doesn't care. What matters is his experience and in the experience there is another person. He sees religious experience as contact with another but will not theorize about what

that other is or even whether there really is an other.

Let's talk for a bit about "seeing-as": we'll start with a visual aid. (We're very high-tech here at Beaverkill Community Church.) Here is a famous drawing of a so-called "duck-rabbit" that the great 20th-century philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein included in his book "Philosophical Investigations" in the course of discussing how we gain our knowledge of the external world; without getting into that topic, suffice it to say that his point was that in experiencing the external world we don't just receive inert sensory images, we see those images in a certain way; we contribute something to our sensory experience. Look at the duck-rabbit. You can see it as a duck or see it as a rabbit and, depending on how you see it you have a different visual experience. A couple of points about seeing-as:

First, it's not a matter of belief. Seeing the image as a duck, say, is not believing it's a duck; you experience it as a duck even though you know it's not intended as an image merely of a duck and could equally be seen as an image of a rabbit. Seeing-as and believing are two different things; seeing-as is an aspect of one's experience while believing something is a mental act, a cognitive act.. Of course, our beliefs can play a role in seeing-as; they can lead our reaction. When we come to the duck-rabbit we have certain beliefs about ducks and rabbits. And our experience can lead us to certain beliefs. Many who have religious experiences like Wittgenstein's move on to the actual belief that they've encountered God one on one and that he has such and such qualities. But the belief is different from the experience.

Second, whether you see the image as a duck or as a rabbit isn't determined by any change in the image before you; same image, only you see it differently.

Now back to Professor Wittgenstein: I'd say that Wittgenstein was discussing an experience which he "sees as" communicating with another. In the interview Wittgenstein discussed the claims of psychologists and the like that you can explain religious experience in psychological, emotional and other terms about the person having the experience without referring to any person – God or anybody else -- on the other end of the experience.

Wittgenstein's response was that, assuming you can do that, so what? It's also possible to "explain" the experience as communication with another, we know not what. He could have put his point in terms of seeing-as. Some see religious experience as a mere psychological event, a reaction to moving, intense aspects of the ordinary world that don't contain a person and don't involve communication; I, on the other hand, says Wittgenstein, see my experience as communication with an awesome presence that I see as another person. Does Wittgenstein "believe" that there is another person there? According to him, he doesn't know what to believe and doesn't care. But he sees it that way.

Now I'd like to use this notion of seeing-as to return to the topic I introduced -- the idea of God's playing a role in the affairs of the world. What I'm talking about is, as in Wittgenstein's case, not a theory of God's actions in the world, not a set of beliefs, but rather a way of seeing the world. People of faith in God see the world as one in which God acts.

Of course, as I suggested above, whether one sees the world as reflecting God's will can depend in part on one's

beliefs about the world. There's a growing conviction among people who are impressed by science that the world is simply a system of cause and effect reflecting the operation of physical and chemical laws. The thought is that in the wonderful, if distant, future, we will be able to explain in detail the origin of the universe, the development of living, sentient beings and the subsequent development of reasoning life, simply by appeal to physics and chemistry and the theory of evolution by natural selection. Based on their theory, they see the world in a certain way, as a merely natural system governed solely by natural law. In fact, we are nowhere near being able to provide anything more than the sketch of such an explanation and in some cases scientific thinking is divided on issues within these purported explanations. And many philosophers today, including non-believers, question the fairly simplistic view of the world that naturalistic thinkers espouse and suggest that the real "facts" about the world are still utterly beyond our comprehension and in fact may always be. There is, of course, also a great body of people who believe, based on their reading of scripture or on the pronouncements of other believers in whose views they place great store, that the best explanation of our world must include a role for God's will. More power to them, as well. In any event, these two sets of beliefs affect how different people see the world -- either as a place merely of natural facts or a place in which God acts. But the beliefs are different from how the world presents itself to them. And I suspect, although I can't get into that here, that no set of ordinary facts about the world will validate one experience of the world as against the other. It may be like the duck-rabbit -- just seeing-as through and through.

The two ways of seeing the world can be reflected on a much more mundane level, in our daily lives. For example, let's think about our own personal achievements. Consider our friend Elmore. Elmore was on his way to a meeting that he was going to chair, one of the most important meetings of his life. He drove into the inner city to his office building and went to park in the lot he always used, but it was full. OK, I'll just park on the street. No empty parking spaces. Drives around the block -- nothing available. Notices the time -- his meeting starts in 5 minutes. Around the block again -- still nothing. Finally in despair he looks up and says, "Lord, please, I need a parking space, quick! Look, I'll go to church every Sunday and help the poor one day a week if you'll please help me!!" He turns the corner and there's a space! As he's pulling in he says, "Never mind, Lord, I found one!"

What happened here? Elmore sees this event as a case of finding a space on his own. Of course, we think we know why he does; it gets him out of a promise he made. We, on the other hand, or at least I, see the event as a case of God's answering his prayer. But in seeing it as answered prayer we don't suppose there necessarily were plainly miraculous events going on; no giant hand taking away a car, not a car simply vanishing, no scenario of the tiny space between two cars slowly widening until there was room for another car, like the multiplication of the loaves and fishes. When we hear the story we just see it as a case of God's answering Elmore's prayer, but how? No specific answer. Things just happened. Same facts -- a parking place opened up. But how you see the facts can differ. As a matter of objective fact, did Elmore have divine help or not? Who's to tell? How did it look? Different story.

Let's change the story a little. Suppose there hadn't been a prayer and a promise. Suppose Elmore had just said "Wow, I'm really in deep yogurt. I really need a break here NOW," and the space turned up, he was elated and proud of himself and he went on to lead a great meeting.

We very well might have a tendency to see things the way Elmore did – just that through hard effort he found a space. We have a tendency to see all of our achievements that way. We see ourselves as achieving things with hard work, brains, talent, guts and maybe a little luck but mainly because we have what it takes and we do what's necessary – or so we say.

One of my favorite movie lines comes in the movie, "The Sting": Newman and Redford are talking about the arch-villain Lannagan and his cronies and Redford says, "Ahh they're not as smart as they think they are," to which Newman replies, "Neither are we."

Maybe, when we take pride in our achievements and we're basking in the praise and the other benefits they bring, we should see things a little differently and consider the possibility that we're not as smart, or talented, or tough as we think we are, and that although it looks to us as if the things we've achieved were won solely by our efforts, we didn't do it all alone. If someone tells us they didn't think we had it in us, maybe they were right – we didn't. Hard to tell. The unseen help that we can't point a finger at may just be part of the way the world works, just our share of luck. But maybe not. No matter whose we think they are maybe we should be thankful for unseen helping hands we don't know about and see the world that way. After all, a little humility never hurt anyone. We don't have to pull a Tim Tebow every time we pull something off; just a little "Thanks, whoever you are" may do.

So I suggest that, whatever the so-called facts, and they may well be beyond our comprehension, there is room to see the world as one in which God's will plays a role even if our own idea of how he does it is vague. In any event, how we experience the world, as revealing God's actions or not, is not a matter of deduction from the facts. If we see God's hand in the world we may come to that experience by various paths, but none of them through a factual proof based on facts in the world. And that includes the big issues -- the very beginning of the world, the development of conscious life; the further development of reasoning life. We may come to how we see the world on the basis of reading scripture, even being raised on scripture, on reading science, on simply looking at the world and being struck by how it seems to reflect intricate design. For my part, when I listen to Mozart's greatest music I have trouble seeing this incredibly beautiful perfection as coming from a mere unaided mortal, no matter how far above other mere mortals he may rank. I don't have that feeling with other great composers, even Bach. They are simply geniuses. Mozart is different.

In any case, you can see the world as a creation and as guided by someone's or something's intentions without basing that on a complicated store of beliefs, and without erecting a complicated theory to explain it. That's how it is with me; it may also be so with you.

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