

"The Spirit Is Willing (But the Flesh Is Weak)"

(Sermon at Beaverkill Community Church, 6/22/2014)

According to the Bible, in the New Testament Gospel of Matthew, these are the words spoken by Jesus, the Christ, in the garden of Gethsemane on the night he was betrayed, arrested, and then tried, convicted, scourged, tortured and crucified. But, knowing in advance that he was about to suffer and die, he had asked his Father, God, "if it be possible," to let the bitter cup pass from his lips, but then acquiesced in the apparent impossibility of what he sought, saying, "nevertheless, not as I will, but as thou wilt."

Thus, in these words, said to have been uttered by the Eternal God who was made man and lived among us, we have presented to us one of the great mysteries of Christian faith: why would God assume human form and then cause Himself to suffer and die so that we might have our sins forgiven and achieve eternal life? I have discovered that people who consider themselves rationalists find this far-fetched.

As a Catholic boy, one of our parish priests explained in catechism class that this was not a problem or a puzzle, something which could be solved by the rational processes of the human intellect, but was instead a "mystery" which could not be solved by the rational processes of the human intellect. As it was, indeed, a precept of the Gospels, and therefore a tenet of Christian belief, it could only be, and had to be, accepted on faith. He was quick to add, however, that the Church accepted that the texts of the Bible, including the Gospels, presented many troublesome inconsistencies. As a result, the Church considered the Bible as only one of several sources of its authority to speak on matters of faith. Other sources were history, tradition, and the inspired interpretations of the Scriptures by the prelates of the Church. This was hard to grasp as a boy, and for me, anyway, it still is.

Later, when I married Sally in the Episcopal Church, I found printed at the beginning of its *Book of Common Prayer* a tract in

a question-and-answer format called "An Outline of the Faith, commonly called the Catechism." This Outline, available on line by the way, and which I find to be a rather good short explanation of Christian belief, takes a similar position on the significance and interpretation of the Bible. For example:

"Q. How do we understand the meaning of the Bible?
A. We understand the meaning of the Bible by the help of the Holy Spirit, who guides the Church in the true interpretation of the Scriptures."

The centuries of religiously inspired warfare, intellectual and physical, comprising what we call today the Reformation, is viewed by many as ultimately based on the issue of who gets to interpret the Bible. I understand that the churches that come out of Calvinism believe that the Bible means what it says but it is the responsibility of each person to read the Bible and to decide for himself, without necessarily relying on the intercession of a priestly or scholarly class, as to what it means. This situation often yields chaotic results, especially when the self-interpreter is not regarded as a learned person.

Have you ever heard the story of Alvin York? He was, at one time, a household name in America, a dirt-poor, barely literate, ignorant rock farmer, and a crack shot with a rifle, from the mountains of Tennessee who experienced a dramatic conversion to Christianity. This epiphany caused him, initially, to be a conscientious objector when conscripted into the Army during World War I. His views about killing changed during the war. On the field of battle in a single day he single-handedly killed 20 of the enemy, silenced 35 machine guns, captured 3 officers and 129 enlisted men, and broke up a battalion that was about to launch a counterattack against the American lines. For this, he received the Congressional Medal of Honor.

A movie, "Sergeant York" starring Gary Cooper, was made about his life. Today, although dated, it still is one of my favorite movies - - - and not because of the battlefield heroism, although it is inspiring - - - but because of York's religious

conversion and his struggle to find what was the right thing do about war based upon his believe in God and the inspiration of the Bible.

The movie begins by showing his early life of poverty and dissolution, smoking, drinking, gambling, brawling and hell-raising, for which he was feared and despised by the barely literate community. One day, during an electrical storm, he and his rowdy drinking companions gallop up to and around the local church, drunk, and contemptuously cursing and firing their revolvers during the worship service. Riding away in the heavy rain Alvin York pulls up his horse and shoots his initials, "AY," into a tree, so that the parishioners will know that he was the one who shot up their church. A bolt of lightning strikes and throws him, unconscious, from his saddle. When he comes to, his wet clothes steaming from the heat of the lightning bolt, he stands up by his dead horse and sees the tree, and his initials, cleft in two by the lightning. The Holy Spirit fills him and he realizes his life was preserved for a greater purpose. Hearing a hymn in progress, he walks into the church and humbly takes off his hat. The pastor, also the general store owner, played by Walter Brennan, sees him, realizes that he has had a conversion experience, motions him to the front of the church, and starts a new hymn,

"Give me that old time religion; give me that old time religion; give me that old time religion, its good enough for me."

This goes on for many verses, citing the Biblical heroes, family and custom, as the basis of traditional belief, and York is welcomed into the congregation.

According to a biography of York, he then promised his mother that he would never drink again as long as he lived; that he would never smoke, chew, gamble, cuss or fight again; and that he would live the life God wanted him to live."

Now, you have to ask yourself how he was to know how to conduct himself to achieve that goal. It is, of course, by the

inspiration of his Bible. But we also know the Bible is filled with seeming inconsistencies and hard to grasp.

During basic training in the Army, his conscientious objector plea was disallowed because, despite his personal and fundamental belief that the Bible proscribes the taking of life, Christian belief, including that of his own mountain sect, did not prohibit killing in war. He is given leave by the Army to return home to consider whether he will fight or resist.

The movie then presents another inspiring scene in which York is found sitting at dawn with his dog and his opened Bible on a bluff overlooking the valley where he lives, having wrestled all night without resolution trying to reconcile his duty to country with his duty to God. Suddenly, a breeze arises and turns the pages of his Bible to Mark 12: 17, where he reads out loud and in wonderment: "and Jesus answering said unto them, render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's." Then York realizes that his personal interpretation of the Biblical commandments can be consonant with his secular duties.

Now, just a few years after York's wartime exploits captured the admiration of the nation, Tennessee conducted a trial in which a substitute high school teacher, John Scopes, was found to have violated a Tennessee law which made it unlawful to teach human evolution in any state-funded school. Two famous politician-lawyers, Clarence Darrow and William Jennings Bryan, appeared in the trial, which then became a national sensation popularly known as the "Monkey Trial." The trial is said to have publicized the Fundamentalist and Modernist Controversy, which set Modernists, who said evolution was not inconsistent with religion, against Fundamentalists, who said the word of God as revealed in the Bible took priority over all human knowledge. The case was thus seen as both a theological contest and a trial on whether modern science, particularly regarding the creation-evolution controversy, should be taught in schools, particularly government schools.

Modern science has won this battle, and the victory has seemed such a rout that most educated people today accept as orthodox that the Biblical accounts of creation, particularly in Genesis, in which, of course, the universe, including the Earth and all the life in and on it, is said to have been created in six days, are myth that cannot be reconciled with scientific discovery of the last several centuries. These scientific discoveries include, particularly, but without limitation, Darwin's 19th-Century Theory of Evolution.

This is so much the orthodoxy, that in a book I read recently, *Ideas, a History of Thought and Invention, from Fire to Freud*, by Peter Watson, a 700-page book which I found incredibly informative and generally neutral in the modern war between religion and science, Watson states that

“. . . since the rediscovery of the gene, in 1900, and the flowering of the technology based on it, Darwinism has triumphed. Except for one or two embarrassing "creationist" enclaves in certain rural areas of the United States, the deep antiquity of the earth, and of mankind, is now firmly established."

No doubt about it, he is talking about the redneck, Bible thumpin' Alvin Yorks in such places as the mountains of Tennessee.

So, the Bible has taken a shellacking at the hand of scientific inquiry in modern times, but the war of ideas is not over. Let's take a look at just one example.

The Bible begins with a solid, profound, and declarative phrase: "In the beginning . . . ," and it goes on, "God created the heaven and the earth." Genesis 1:1.

The Bible, at its beginning, declares that there was a beginning of the world, of the universe. Until recently, I accepted the implication of this phrase intuitively. All things in my earthly experience have a beginning, a middle, and an end.

Yet, this very phrase in fact raises a big issue. This issue divides religions that follow the Book --- Jews, Christians, Muslims --- from other major religions--- Buddhists, Hindus. This issue --- Was there a beginning? --- also divides secular thinkers, philosophers, and scientists.

Bertrand Russell, a well-known British philosopher of the 20th Century, wrote a monograph in 1927 called "Why I Am Not a Christian." In this he explained why he did not believe in God and in immortality and why he did not "think that Christ was the best and wisest of men." Among other things, Russell said "There is no reason to suppose that the world had a beginning at all. The idea that things must have a beginning is really due to the poverty of our thoughts."

We can bring such thoughts closer to home. Tim Foote, whom I hope we will see here in a week or two, was talking with me about this and other issues some weeks ago. As a writer and editor, Tim knows a lot of people and a lot of things of interest. He finally wrote me that these issues led him to a quotation from an extraordinary small book of research and reporting called *The Kingdom of Auschwitz* by an old friend, Otto Friedrich. His book inevitably takes up a number of viewpoints about what happened at Auschwitz. One viewpoint was, obviously, that "there was not, there could not be a God, for he could not condone such godlessness." Another was that "all efforts to prove or explain God's purposes demonstrate only the futile diligence of worker ants attempting to prove the existence of Mozart."

One must ponder the poverty of our thoughts in the face of the Eternal, indeed.

Well, poor worker ants we may be, but still we have to soldier on with what we have, or at least with the information and intellect Someone has given us.

Two years ago I addressed this congregation on the subject of whether the Holy Trinity, that is, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, was the same as the "Kingdom, the Power and the Glory",

as Christ used the phrase in giving us the Lord's Prayer. Further, I asked whether this phrase was in fact another way of expressing the composition of the universe, a universe the scientists are telling us is made up of matter, energy, and information. I pointed to John's Gospel, which begins "In the beginning [!] was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." John 1:1. I asked whether John's "Word" might be the same thing as the word "information" that scientists use in considering the truth, or not, of explanation of the universe set forth in Einstein's Theory of Relativity. I asked if the Holy Spirit is information and whether the Holy Spirit existed before, and caused, the creation, the Beginning.

In particular, I referred then to today's Gospel reading, John 6:51-58, where Jesus alienates some of his disciples with an admonition to eat His body and blood. Here are selections that most interested me in this context:

"Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them. ⁵⁷Just as the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father, so whoever eats me will live because of me. ⁵⁸This is the bread that came down from heaven, not like that which your ancestors ate, and they died. But the one who eats this bread will live forever. . . It is the spirit that gives life; the flesh is useless. The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life."

I pointed out that, if Jesus had attempted to reveal these thoughts to a modern audience, perhaps instead of using flesh and blood as his metaphor, he might have said that the DNA, the genes, the instructions organizing the matter of life, the information contained in the spiral helix code within every living cell, a small part of which gives the formula for mankind and an even smaller part of which gives each man his peculiar traits and individual identity, is what a person must eat or absorb in order to have spirit and life. This information, this identity, a name known to God, is what gives man his soul and his unity with the Holy Spirit, if only he unites with, eats it, absorbs it, of his free will.

Perhaps that also is what Jesus meant when He referred to the necessity of being "born again" (John: 3) to achieve salvation, the great promise of Christianity.

Finally, I asked whether the modern cascade of scientific discovery is proving or disproving Biblical descriptions of miracles, reality, of the world and the universe.

My answer was that from what I could see the tide may be turning somewhat in this war of ideas back toward a belief that the Biblical accounts may be weightier than the mythic material as commonly supposed by many.

Since that sermon, I discovered that, like most of my ideas, which through ignorance I conceived to be original, actually already have been thought out, and the issues posed and possible answers formulated by others.

A few months ago I was interested in the fact that the Thanksgiving and Easter, for the first time, coincided with the Jewish holidays of Chanukah and Passover. In studying how this was true, which involves a complicated comparison of solar versus lunar calendars and insertion of make-up months, I ran across an article by Dr. Gerald L. Schroeder, an MIT Ph.D. with degrees in earth sciences and physics.

In this he points out that:

"In 1959, a survey was taken of leading American scientists. Among the many questions asked was, "What is your concept of the age of the universe?" Now, in 1959, astronomy was popular, but cosmology - the deep physics of understanding the universe - was just developing. The response to that survey was recently republished in Scientific American - the most widely read science journal in the world. Two-thirds of the scientists gave the same answer:

"Beginning? There was no beginning. Aristotle and Plato taught us 2400 years ago that the universe is eternal. Oh, we know the Bible says 'In the beginning.' That's a nice

story, but we sophisticates know better. There was no beginning."

"That was 1959. In 1965, Penzias and Wilson discovered the echo of the Big Bang in the black of the sky at night, and the world paradigm changed from a universe that was eternal to a universe that had a beginning. After 3000 years of arguing, science has come to agree with the Torah."

Here is the Old Testament, the Book of Genesis, validated by scientific inquiry.

By the way, Schroeder also explains how modern science now can explain how the the six days after creation, the six days during which the Bible says that God made the heavens and earth, when viewed from the point of the beginning of the universe, from the infinitesimal point of the Big Bang, that these six days given the effects of gravity and the speed of light and the rate of expansion of the universe, that these six days, from our point of view on earth, would equal about 15 billion years. This is the currently estimated age of the universe. His conclusion: The making of the universe as we see it today actually did take six days.

That was a short exposition of a much greater concept, and a teaser of sorts, but I did buy and read Dr. Schroeder's book. I must say that he makes out an interesting case of how science today smooths out the inconsistencies in, and bears out the verity of, many of the books of the Old Testament.

Having run out of time, I will end by reminding you all that from John we have: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God."

And from John we also have Jesus' words that "It is the spirit that gives life; the flesh is useless" and "The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life."

And from John Adams (not our John Adams, but the second President of the United States) we have in a letter he wrote to Thomas Jefferson in 1820:

"When we say God is a spirit, we know what we mean, as well as we do when we say that the pyramids of Egypt are matter. Let us be content, therefore, to believe him to be a spirit, that is, an essence that we know nothing of, in which originally and necessarily reside all energy, all power, all capacity, all activity, all wisdom, all goodness."

We can learn more about this in accordance with our Christian duty to know, love and serve God. For now, it is enough to find consolation in the delight that there is work ahead of us.

Amen.