

June 6, 2011 - Pentacost

Good morning. Let me just say a few things about our scripture readings for this morning.

The most important reading is Acts 2:1-11, which is, in a way, the birthday announcement of the Christian Church. Today is Pentecost Sunday; Pentecost was originally a Jewish holiday – actually, it still is, under the name Shavuoth – occurring 50 days after the end of Passover and celebrating the giving of the law at Sinai and the establishment of Israel as God’s people. At Pentacost a group of Jesus’s disciples were gathered together in a house, and the Holy Spirit descended upon them in the form of a mighty wind and tongues of flame, and, through the Holy Spirit, they were able to preach to people of various languages from over the world and be understood. There is a humorous verse later on in which some of those witnessing the new apostles’ behavior at first wondered if they were drunk; Peter addressed the onlookers and assured them that the apostles were not drunk – after all, it was 9:00 in the morning! In any event, this event is said to mark the foundation of the Church as a wider community than the original twelve. So, happy birthday, Church!

The Gospel reading, from John, places the giving of the Holy Spirit, and the empowering of the Church for its mission, on the evening of Easter Day, when Jesus appears to his disciples (except for Thomas, who will not believe Jesus has risen until he sees Jesus, which happens later). Some see the founding of the Church as occurring in these events. But we can’t tarry over this issue now.

The reading from Paul's letter to the Corinthians sees Paul attempting to herd the cats in the church he has founded at Corinth; basically he is saying that various members have different things to contribute even though all these abilities stem from the same Holy Spirit.

But today I'd like to spend the bulk of my time on something else. Today I'd like to speak about .... Helllll. Yes.... Helllll.

It's an informal principle of ours to link our remarks to the scripture for the day. A comment on that: I did some research on each of our texts for today, found them interesting and so forth, but came away with nothing enlightening I wanted to share. "Oh, hell," I said. "Hmmm. Hell...." So that's how today's texts took me to the topic I'll speak about – hell.

Actually, my discussion is basically a book report. Earlier this year a popular preacher in the U.S. Evangelical movement, Rob Bell, published a book called "Love Wins," which is making quite a splash. Its subtitle is "A Book About Heaven, Hell, and the Fate of every Person Who Ever Lived." In it, Bell challenges the standard Evangelical line, and the line of most traditionalist Christian churches – that those who accept Jesus go to heaven and those who don't accept him go to hell to suffer in torment for eternity. In other words, huge numbers – perhaps the vast majority -- of us sinners will endure eternal torture in hell.

Bell differs: he offers the idea that Jesus's redemptive work is universal, that he's provided a place in heaven for everyone, and that "hell," to the extent that it really exists, is only a temporary stop for some to get straightened out on the way to heaven. (Incidentally, I found out in reading about Bell's book and the, um, "spirited" reaction to it, that there is a term for people

who talk like Bell – they are “universalists.” Clearly, to Christian conservatives, to be a “universalist” is a bad thing.)

Anyway, the reaction has indeed been “spirited”, especially from Evangelical conservatives, because Bell has been called in the press one of the Evangelical movement’s “rock stars”; he’s extremely popular, successful and charismatic and his blast against orthodoxy is coming from within the movement itself. I first became aware of Bell’s book from an article on the internet from Time, and I want to acknowledge that I’ve benefited from that article (in addition to reading through Bell’s book twice). The article quotes R. Albert Mohler Jr., president of the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, as saying that Bell’s book is “theologically disastrous. Any of us should be concerned when a matter of theological importance is played with in a subversive way.... When you adopt universalism and erase the distinction between the church and the world, then you don’t need the church, and you don’t need Christ, and you don’t need the cross. This is the tragedy of nonjudgmental mainline liberalism, and it’s Rob Bell’s tragedy in this book, too.” This is one of the sillier versions of the opposition to Bell: On Bell’s view, of course you need Christ and the cross – that’s part of his point. But you get the idea; other critics are more sober.

How does Bell support his thesis? His primary argument is that, through God’s love, Jesus was sacrificed for the sins of humanity, and the existence of a place of eternal torment for sinners is irreconcilable with this; the very idea of hell as such a place is inconsistent with God’s (and Jesus’s) unconditional love. Connected to this is the idea that perfectly innocent people would be condemned to hell, such as babies or people who died without hearing about Jesus’s redeeming

gospel, including the millions, including morally great men and women, who lived and died before Jesus appeared. What, Bell asks, if the missionary had a flat tire? Bell's idea is that Jesus really did die for everyone's sins, not just for the sins of a tiny few who are lucky enough to "believe in" Him, whatever that may mean.

In making his point, Bell refers us to various Christian church websites that, he says, "include a section on what the people in the church believe about the people who don't believe what they believe". Bell goes on: "This is from an actual church website; 'The unsaved will be separated forever from God in hell.' This is from another: 'Those who don't believe in Jesus will be sent to eternal punishment in hell.' And this is from another 'The unsaved dead will be committed to an eternal conscious punishment.' So in the first statement, the "unsaved" won't be with God. In the second, not only will they not be with God, but they'll be sent somewhere else to be punished. And in the third, we're told that not only will these "unsaved" be punished forever, but they will be fully aware of it -- in case we were concerned they might down an Ambien [I take it that's a sleeping pill or something similar] or two when God wasn't looking... All of this on a website. Welcome to our church. Yet on these very same websites are extensive affirmations of the goodness and greatness of God... statements of belief about a God who is "mighty," "powerful," "loving," ... "full of grace and mercy...."

It's admitted all around that the content of Bell's protest is not new. (As I said, it even has a name -- "universalism".) He himself claims that it has been around since the first church. What gives this book some urgency is not only the eloquence and passion with which he writes but also the fact that, as an Evangelical "rock star" he would be expected (and hoped) to man the

ramparts in favor of the traditionalist view, in defense of which Evangelicals are usually among the stoutest warriors.

The standard objection to Bell's "universalism," hinted at in the hysterical quote reproduced above, is that without the threat of eternal damnation, no one will follow Jesus, there will be no morality, "everything will be permitted," as we are told by a well-known writer who instructs us in the proper virtues. This argument found classic expression in the 19<sup>th</sup>-century philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche's famous proclamation that "God is dead." Here is the quotation from his "Gay Science":

Have you not heard of that madman who lit a lantern in the bright morning hours, ran to the market-place, and cried incessantly: "I am looking for God! I am looking for God!"

As many of those who did not believe in God were standing together there, he excited considerable laughter. Have you lost him, then? said one. Did he lose his way like a child? said another. Or is he hiding? Is he afraid of us? Has he gone on a voyage? or emigrated? Thus they shouted and laughed. The madman sprang into their midst and pierced them with his glances.

"Where has God gone?" he cried. "I shall tell you. We have killed him - you and I. We are his murderers.... [after further lamenting,] Here the madman fell silent and again regarded his listeners; and they too were silent and stared at him in astonishment. At last he threw his lantern to the ground, and it broke and went out. "I have come too early," he

said then; "my time has not come yet. The tremendous event is still on its way, still travelling - it has not yet reached the ears of men. Lightning and thunder require time, the light of the stars requires time, deeds require time even after they are done, before they can be seen and heard. This deed is still more distant from them than the distant stars - and yet they have done it themselves."

It has been further related that on that same day the madman entered divers churches and there sang a requiem. Led out and quietened, he is said to have retorted each time: "what are these churches now if they are not the tombs and sepulchres of God?"

Nietzsche's point, of course, is not that God is literally dead – indeed, Nietzsche was a vociferous atheist – but that the idea of God, including the idea of God as the origin and enforcer of the moral law -forms the underpinning of conventional morality and that the idea of God was actually ceasing to play this role and that the old underpinnings of traditional morality were falling away.

There are several replies to this objection, which I have no time to canvas. To my mind, the most telling one is that if Jesus's message is as compelling as his supporters think it is, the threat of eternal damnation should not be necessary. We remember Patricia's telling us about Jefferson's bible, shorn of references to divinity and eternal this and that, which Jefferson claimed to contain the most sublime morality ever formulated. In the passage I partially quoted, Nietzsche was to

argue that a higher morality should take its place, one not relying on the idea of divine punishment; Bell thinks we have that morality before us already.

In any event, I've always wondered what kind of Christian it is who "accepts" Jesus only to escape eternal torture? I'm reminded of the famous argument of the 17<sup>th</sup> Century French mathematician and philosopher Blaise Pascal; the argument, traditionally dubbed "Pascal's Wager," is to the effect that, assuming you don't know whether God exists or not, it is more rational to believe that He exists: Then if he does in fact exist, you reap a great reward whereas if he does not, you are out nothing. If, on the other hand, look at what happens if you believe that He does not exist; if you're right, it gains you nothing but if he does exist when you believe he doesn't, you suffer eternal torments and lose big time; in short, if you believe He exists, you lose nothing and may win big whereas if you believe he doesn't exist you gain nothing and may lose big. One of the replies to Pascal has been that this kind of phony belief, adopted only to escape eternal punishment, won't cut it with God. But then why tell us about eternal punishment anyway if doing so won't herd us into heaven?

Bell also argues that although there are passages in the Bible that support the traditionalist view, there are others that do not, and those that seem to support it can be reinterpreted to avoid the doctrine that all those who do not accept Jesus for whatever reason are condemned to eternal torture. He has encountered much flak over his reinterpretations. To cite perhaps the most troubling example, there is Matthew 25: 31-46, where Jesus seems to say that when he comes into his glory he will separate the righteous from the unrighteous and the unrighteous "will go away to eternal punishment and the righteous to eternal life." Bell thinks the

original Greek that is normally translated “eternal punishment” is better translated as something akin to a period of correction, after which the reformed and purified sinner will join God in heaven. There has been much give and take here; you can get a start on the debate by reading the reviews of Bell’s book on Amazon.

We have to leave this ancient quandary – If God is love and Jesus died for all of us, why is there a hell? But those of us who have puzzled over it can be sure we will hear more of it now that Rob Bell has joined the doubters. For now, I wish that I could leave with a bit of refreshing humor about hell. I asked a law partner of mine who is an expert on Dante’s Inferno and thus knows much about hell for a hell joke or two, He and I thought together for a while and concluded that there are lots of jokes about celebrities in hell, and of course jokes about lawyers in hell, but these are really jokes about celebrities and lawyers; but as to jokes about hell itself .... There aren’t any. Hell is not a laughing matter.

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