Sermon for Proper 5

RCL Lectionary, Year C

1 Kings 17:8-24 / Psalm 146 / Galatians 1:11-24 / Luke 7:11-17

The Second Sunday after Pentecost

June 6th, 2010
The Episcopal Church of Our Saviour
Mill Valley, California

Tackling Gnosticism

by The Rev. Richard E. Helmer

There is little more bracing for a preacher than to be accused of heresy – even if it is only the casual remarks of the angry and anonymous on the internet these days. Many of you will recall my somewhat facetious remarks last week when an online essay I authored[1] was recently turned into a straw man of heresy – and, specifically, Gnosticism – for those most angry right now with The Episcopal Church.

While leaving it to others to draw their own conclusions about whether the charges of Gnosticism should stick, I want to revisit this episode a bit more deeply, because in our prayer life, the daily office lectionary has been moving through the book of Proverbs in recent weeks. And in the heat of going back and forth over whether or not I was indulging in Gnosticism, Jim Ward, Rector of St. Stephen's – who is a good friend and mentor (I am sad to report that he is retiring this autumn)—quoted to me this wise verse from our daily readings: "A rebuke goes deeper into a discerning person than a hundred blows into a fool."[2]

Jim is a great teacher and a good friend to me – for I often can't tell with certainty whether he's being serious or sardonic. That mystery gives his words an edge. I sit up and listen when he speaks. So, I had to wonder, was I being rightly rebuked by a handful of our more conservative sisters and brothers, or was I simply being unfairly excoriated, or – in the more likely mixed-up nature of our world – a bit of both? Understanding demanded more of me than simply rejecting my opponents' arguments as emotional outburst. There was some substance behind their umbrage, and it was incumbent upon me to dig a little to try to find out what that substance was.

You know, it never hurts to read what your self-styled opponents – theological or otherwise – are reading. So I turned this week to some writing by N. T. Wright, the New Testament scholar and soon-to-retire Bishop of Durham. Wright is widely read and respected by the more conservative and evangelical wings of The Episcopal Church and the wider Anglican Communion. Yet he falls well into the great tradition of Anglicanism: his writing is insightful, grounded in our Christian tension of reason, tradition, and scripture, and it is filled with his own distinctive blend of charm and wit. In the best Anglican fashion, he commands respect from all quarters, while not full agreement, to be sure.

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[1] http://www.episcopalcafe.com/daily/family/chastity_now.php
[2] Proverbs 17:10.

In an essay I stumbled upon this week – one N. T. Wright authored in response to the last Lambeth Conference of Anglican Bishops[3] – he writes about Gnosticism and its contemporary manifestations in the West, and as I read his words, they struck home for me and, I reckon, for all of us.

It is easy to dismiss Gnosticism as an artifact of history – most of you probably don't know the term at all well. Wright notes that when, as a student, he was studying about the Gnostics, they seemed like a distinctly second-century phenomenon, strange relics of a diverse Christian antiquity only to be pondered these days by intellectuals sitting today high and lofty in their academic towers. But in fact, as Wright points out, Gnosticism has two key features that remain very much alive with us common folk today. The first is what he calls "radical dualism" – the idea that the spirit and body are at odds with one another, or in our individualistic and profit-driven society, that the we can exploit the physical world and our bodies for whatever ends we deem appropriate, and that includes the physical exploitation of others and of nature. Though N. T. Wright's essay is two years old, we only have to look to the mess in the Gulf to see exactly what he means – unreflective Gnosticism of this sort at work in millions of gallons of sweet crude fouling beaches, poisoning the ecosystem beneath the waves and above, destroying livelihoods of our neighbors; that visage informing our withering national faith in our engineering ingenuity and technology's ability to save us.

A second feature, Wright says, is that Gnosticism is a religion not of redemption, but of self-discovery.[4] Ours is an age indeed of continuing Gnostic self-help and "I'm OK, you're OK" – that ubiquitous Californian cliché that one anonymous commentator, interestingly, saw rightly or wrongly in my writing about chastity. "There is even a danger," N. T. Wright further says, "that we Anglicans spend time discussing 'who we really are', as though there were some inner thing, the Anglican spark, and if only we could identify that then we'd be all right. And in some of our most crucial ethical debates people have assumed for a long time that 'being true to myself' was all that really mattered." I think Wright's on to a profound truth here, although I might respond differently than he does to this character of the contemporary, individualistic West.

Viewed this way, Gnosticism is the generic spiritualism that surrounds us in many forms – the notion that my spirituality is self-crafted and self-fulfilling, that "my own path" is sufficient for me. The Marin spirituality of "self improvement" is a form of Gnosticism, when the reality -- at least as we Christians reckon it -- is that self is meaningless without others, without accountability, without rough-and-tumble relationship and the knocks of shared experience – where community is the crucible of our redemption, of our renewal.

Is his address, N. T. Wright prefers to contrast this contemporary self-realizing Gnosticism with some traditionally evangelical language about God's "rescuing" us, which, frankly, is a way of describing redemption I'm not all that keen on. There's more to Christian redemption than merely being pulled out of a world burning with hellfire and brimstone, or of our being washed clean of the sticky crude like a pelican in the Gulf of Mexico. Indeed, it's also a bit Gnostic to talk of being "rescued" from this world,

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[3] N. Thomas Wright, "The Bishop and Living Under Scripture," *Christ and Culture: Communion After Lambeth.* Canterbury Studies in Anglicanism, Canterbury Press/Morehouse: 2010. 144-166.
[4] Ibid., 157-160.

as it suggests another kind of dualism that is foreign to an incarnational faith. As we are fond of saying, we may not be “of the world,” but we are most certainly in it, just as Jesus was and the Spirit is. Our redemption is not simply about the salvation of individuated souls divorced from the world, but of the salvation of our full being in the world. Put another way, our redemption must be about the world’s redemption, or our redemption is selfish, disconnected, and effectively meaningless.

"I'm OK, you're OK" is indeed that bland, Gnostic, hands-off tolerance our pluralistic society professes. But we don't need simply to be "rescued," pulled from the stagnant, tepid waters of tolerance. Rather we need the Gospel to stir and heat them with Christ's life-giving radical engagement, forgiveness, acceptance, and healing of our full humanity. The Gospel, the good news of God in Christ, the message we take from the proclamation of Christ’s resurrection and the indwelling of the Holy Spirit is most certainly not "I'm OK, you're OK." But nor is it the ubiquitously old-fashioned American, "I'm a sinner, you're a sinner, too." Rather, we could say the Gospel message this way: “God is loving you and me together out of death into new community, into new life."

Our Christian faith embeds us in the relational challenges and hardships of community, it embraces and transforms the realities of pain and suffering, which are made divinely real and prescient in the cross and passion of Jesus Christ, and it gives tangible reality to our confession of what we have done and left undone; our call to set aside selfish ambition that exploits – to embrace instead the service that attends to the pressing needs in the world around us: in our neighbors, in our homes, in our selves, and, yes, very much in our bodies.

What does this have to do with our readings today? Everything, I think. For Gnosticism could not be farther from the deeply physical, the deeply miraculous divine engagement with people’s very lives in today’s classic story of the widow of Zarephath and the parallel Gospel of Jesus raising a widow’s son.

The 1 Kings reading, close to the beginning of the cycle of stories about the great prophet Elijah, is remarkably important in Judeo-Christian tradition. So much so, that this is a story Jesus alludes to when he’s teaching in his hometown of Nazareth.[5] It begins not with some “out there” spiritualism, but with the very hollow-in-the-gut, physical hunger of a widow and her son, preparing for their last meal, and that most poignant line – amongst my personal favorites in all of Scripture: "As the LORD your God lives, I have nothing baked, only a handful of meal in a jar, and a little oil in a jug; I am now gathering a couple of sticks, so that I may go home and prepare it for myself and my son, that we may eat it, and die." Is that not the song of our most pressing needs? Of our deepest unfulfilled hungers? The song of a suffering Gulf coast, the unarticulated cry of the struggling wildlife, of our exploited planet? Is this not the refrain of the teeming hungry and the marginalized confronting their invisibility and facing extinction?

Elijah does not suggest she offer a mere prayer to God, or go off by herself and meditate to escape her suffering, but rather that she tangibly and painfully offer him a portion of her last meal, the very thing that sustains her and her son’s lives. It is in that offering that she discovers God’s power to sustain their life, to fulfill their deepest hunger. And this kind of physical, tangible offering continues almost

[5] Luke 4:22-30

immediately in the story when she gives her dying, if not already lifeless son to Elijah. She is commanded to give him that which is most precious to her – more precious than even her own life. The language is so explicitly clear: Elijah takes her son from her bosom and carries him away. In a similar, physical, incarnate manner, in today's Gospel, Jesus touches the bier of the dead man – an act that would have rendered him ritually unclean. See how he loves even the bodies of the dead! Both Jesus and Elijah restore the lives of these sons to their mothers, and, in effect raise the widows from the dead as well.

For our spiritual ancestors and for us this day, we are reminded that God's acts of power are not worked out in the abstracted "spiritual", but in the real and tangible, the physical. As Christians, we do not merely meditate on the Word, we engage with it: in our worship, we listen to story together, shoulder to shoulder, bringing our physical selves with all of our imperfections and edges into community. In study and in Godly Play, we wrestle with our story in speech and craft, making it part of our physical selves. We get it "into our bones," which is why our engagement with scripture is so critical, and why it must happen not in a comfortable armchair at home, but in the discomfort of community. We splash in water in our baptism, we eat bread we call Jesus' body and wine we call Christ's blood – that is, God's life incarnate amongst us. Ours is indeed an incarnational faith, not a Gnostic one.

Our service to the wider world is about following in the paths of Elijah and our beloved Christ, of raising the dead, of responding to the pleas of widows preparing for their final meal. Our youth are preparing for a mission trip in a few weeks that is about raising up and repairing homes for people who need physical shelter for their wholeness; we refuse to leave them in the rain to pray. We consider our sisters and brothers on the front lines of the worst oil spill in American history: whether they are operating robots a mile beneath the sea or shoveling contaminated sand or scrubbing oil from the fragile feathers and skins of God's creatures. How can we tangibly help them this day? Prayer is only the beginning.

And most of all today, we are reminded that our life with God—our relationship—is about offering ourselves, and not just as spiritual abstracts, but as physical, incarnate beings. Gnosticism might have us offering mere acknowledgment or simple intellectual assent, or resting comfortably in our beautiful Anglican prayers. That's not what God wants of us. That's not what God needs to truly transform us. God needs everything we are – body and soul – an offering that Jesus makes upon the cross, and that we *re-member*, that is, enter into and take into ourselves in each Eucharist. So what will you offer this week to God that moves beyond our cultural trappings of Gnosticism? And I don't mean just here in church, but out there, where our faith meets the real world. Where will you be invited to take the dying in your arms? To touch the bier of the dead that life might be restored? How will you make an offering that incarnates your faith and makes real what you profess—the acts that make your faith real, that lay claim to your being a fully incarnate person of God?

All questions for us, worthy of a faith that means more than words on a page, that is more than merely "spiritual" in the contemporary sense, and that lives into transforming a world very much in need of healing, in need of resurrection, in need of God's Spirit that makes God's dream real. . .So that we and all creation may not only touch, but become again the fully embodied work of the divine.