

Wonalancet Chapel
August 10, 2003
Sermon: S. Lester Ralph

IN THE BEGINNING.....

Text:

St. John, Chapter I:

In the beginning was the Word. And the Word was with God. And the Word was God. All things were made by Him. In Him was Life, and the Life was the Light of men. And The Word was made flesh and dwelt among us. And we beheld His glory, the glory of the only Begotten of the Father, full of grace and Truth.

Of all the translations for "Word" the one that most opens the meaning of the text is "the meaning of it all." In the beginning was the meaning of it all.

I. Philosophy.

Philosophers from the beginning of time to the present have sought to find and provide answers to three questions:

- a. What can we know?
- b. How should we live?
- c. How should we be governed?

Through the ages philosophers have come up with different systems to deal with these questions: Manicheism, idealism, realism, rationalism, relativism, nihilism, pragmatism, empiricism, stoicism -to name but a few, in answer to the first two questions; in answer to the third, we have had monarchy, tyranny, oligarchy, fascism, syndicalism, democracy -again, to name but a few.

Each system flourished and for a time seemed to put it all together, but eventually each became the symbol of a historical period to be replaced by another and another. The reality is that all of these systems remind us of the elephant with many blind people touching different parts of the body. One would say 'the elephant is a trunk;' another 'the elephant is a leg;' another 'the elephant a tail,' and so on. Only if they had been able accept that what they sensed was a part of something bigger could they have come up with anything vaguely looking like an elephant.

We are now in what is called the "Post Modern" era, wherein having tasted all the possible understandings of philosophy and the world-wide intermingling of ideas and beliefs, we doubt that there are any absolute answers to the three fundamental questions. The "Post Modern" world thus is identifiable by two basis responses to virtually everything: "It's all relative," and "it's a matter of opinion."

If this is true we should write an Afterward to Charles Darwin's Origin of Species, and observe the final stage of human evolution was that mankind will become spineless jellyfish.

2. Religion.

I protest this Post Modern pretense of sophisticated understanding.

There are universal Values; there are timeless Truths. I can be a person of conviction without becoming a zealot or fanatic; I can have a Faith and a system of Values which guide and order my life without my being blind to new understanding and continuing growth of mind and spirit.

One other sign of the Post Modern world is the growing sense that Science is the only thing we can trust. Science is not a philosophy at all, but rather a method of understanding reality, of seeing how things work. It is a tool for understanding. As with the advent of each new system of philosophy there is a wave of euphoria during which they would have us believe they are on the verge of unraveling the mystery of life. The truth is that, even with such discoveries as those from the Hubble space-craft or increasing evidence of the 'big bang' creation of the universe, the mystery has only deepened the mystery. We now know that the heavens are vastly greater than we had thought, and how this little universe of which we are a part was formed. But the mystery remains.

What can we know?

How should we live?

How should we be governed? People of Faith ask a fourth question, or rather ask the second question differently: WHAT MUST I DO TO BE SAVED? Thus, we start off with three basic assumptions: Life has meaning; Life has purpose; we are responsible for the Life we are. What must I do to be saved? Is a dynamic question and propels us into a lifelong pursuit. The questions of philosophy pose the danger of keeping us forever passive and never getting on with the adventure of life. When we frame the question in terms of requiring a response we ever thereafter live as though how we live makes an eternal difference.

What must I do to be Saved? Herodotus, who lived in Athens 484-425 B.C. is considered the first historian. He wrote a history of the Persian Wars with Athens, and in that history (Chapter 64, Book 2) he has a colloquy between Solon, the wisest man of the ancient world and Croessus, the richest man in the ancient world. Croessus asks that Solon be brought to him to have him confirm that Croessus is the happiest of men. When Solon appears, Croessus asks "who is the happiest of men?" Solon thinks and names someone nobody has heard of. Croessus smirks and asks "who is the second most happy man in the world?" Solon again hesitates and finally responds: "Clopus and Bido." "Clopus and Bido? I never heard of them either." Solon explains: "They were brothers. Their mother had arranged to go to the temple for special prayers and was afraid she would be late. Clopus and Bido yoked themselves to a cart and ran five miles to the temple. While their mother went inside to pray they fell asleep. She prayed that her sons might die the happiest of men. Her sons never awakened. Why were they the happiest of men? Not because they took their mother to the temple as such, but because they lived lives of Honor, of Decency, of Nobility. And their monument is that of having lived worthy lives. Solon continued, to Croessus: It is too early to tell if you are the happiest; that cannot be known while you live, and thus you will not yourself ever know. When you are gone we shall see how you are remembered: a rich, powerful man, or a man of virtue, honor, decency and kindness."

3. Every person in this earth has a faith. If we think "it's all relative," or it's a matter of opinion, at least know the implications of such a casual approach:

William James, my favorite philosopher by far, and a man who lived between Cambridge, MA and Chocorua wrote in his "Will To Believe":

"What do you think of yourself? What do you think of the world?.....These are questions with which all must deal as it seems good to them. They are riddles of the Sphinx, and in some way or other we must deal with them.....In all important transactions of life we have to take a leap in the dark.....If we decide to leave the riddles unanswered, that is a choice. If we waver in our answer, that too is a choice. But whatever choice we make, we make it at our peril. If a man chooses to turn his back altogether on God and the future, no one can prevent him. No one can show him beyond reasonable doubt that he is mistaken, If a man thinks otherwise, and acts as he thinks, I do not see how anyone can prove that he is mistaken. Each must act as he thinks best, and if he is wrong so much the worse for him. We stand on a mountain pass in the midst of whirling snow and blinding mist, through which we get glimpses now and then of paths which may be deceptive. If we stand still, we shall be frozen to death. If we take the wrong road, we shall be dashed to pieces. We do not certainly know whether there is any right one. What must we do? Be strong and of a good courage. Act for the best, hope for the best, and take what comes. If death ends all, we cannot meet death better."

I told some of you about our son Tom, who was at Ft. Benning, Georgia, at Officer Training School several year ago. He was training to be a paratrooper, and Joyce and I went to the graduation ceremonies on a hot August afternoon. As each plane flew over forty men jumped. After each jump the Red Cross ambulance would speed out onto the field to help whoever had been injured from the jump. As fate would have it, Tom was in the final plane, and our anxiety was mounting. An off-duty drill sergeant was there, and I mentioned to him that I knew the condition of Tom's closet at home, and I didn't have full confidence that he would pack his parachute properly. The drill sergeant replied: "Not to worry. The parachutes are packed by civilian employees, and part of their contract stipulates that on any given day we may arrive unannounced and tell them that tomorrow they jump in the parachute they packed today."

Each of us is gradually packing a faith upon which we shall inevitably call upon for strength, courage and destiny.

My wife has always exhorted me that a sermon should be "marching orders" to the congregation. Here are the marching orders. Joyce is a member of Chuck Colson's Prison Fellowship, and among other things she writes to a number of prisoners. A few weeks ago she received the letter which I gave to each of you this morning. She had not written to this prisoner, but he had heard about her and wrote this letter hoping for a response.

Let me say three things: There are 8 billion or so souls on the planet: all of us are desperate some of the time, many of us are desperate most of the time; some among us are desperate all of the time. If we ask the question "What must I do to be saved?" and accept Herodotus' judgment that he/she who lives a noble, caring, loyal life answers that question, find a Carl Zelinsky, a person/persons who will say after you are gone that 'when I needed you, you were there for me, and that has made all the difference.' How do to this? Circumstance will dictate. Betty Friedan, one of the prominent advocates for Women's Rights in our time was once asked sarcastically just what did women want from men? Instead of taking the bait, she answered quietly: "What do women want from men? A look A touch.....A word..... Would any of us ask for more?or less?

May we each let the light of our lives so shine that others might see, give thanks and give glory to God.