

30 May, 2010: Trinity Sunday, Year C  
Prov 8:1-4, 22-31; Ps 8  
Rom 5:1-5; John 16:12-15

ON CHRISTMAS EVE, 1968, Frank Borman, Jim Lovell and Bill Anders circled the earth, 240,000 miles away. As their spacecraft passed behind the moon, they lost sight of earth entirely, then, as they emerged, they saw the earth hovering above the lunar surface. The picture they took that night, "Earthrise," depicts our world, a beautiful, blue-green globe just over half full, hovering above the barren surface of the moon: gray, lifeless, cratered, and empty. That first view of earth of space showed us the choice we all face -- abundant life or sterility -- and it showed us the truth about our world. Seen from space, there were no lines between countries, no lines between races, no barriers between one portion of ocean and another. On that tiny globe, our home, what happened anywhere happened to all of us.

I do not know what that picture would look like today, how close you would have to be to see the changes. Would the air seem dimmer from 100,000 miles? How close would you have to be to see the encroaching desertification in northern Africa, the oil plumes spreading through the Gulf, the fires burning on the ocean? From how far away can you see the portion of our world which has been transformed from the green of forest and plain and farmland to the grey concrete of cities and the rust of industrial waste? How close would we need to be to care enough to make us change?

"Does not wisdom call, and does not understanding raise her voice? On the [internet], [on the television], at the crossroads she takes her stand; beside the gates of the town, at the entrance of all the portals she cries out: "To you, O people, I call, and my cry is to all that live. O simple ones, learn prudence." (Prov 8:1-5) Learn prudence, because we are destroying the source of our own food. Learn prudence, for rare and exquisite creatures are dying. Learn prudence, because the children in our cities are choking with asthma and the elders in our countryside are watching crops fail; "the deep affords no water and the rivers are exhausted; [in too many places,] the children cry out for bread and there is no one who breaks it to feed them."<sup>1</sup> An article in yesterday's Times puts it succinctly: "Exploring and protecting the gulf has simply not been as high a national priority as drilling it for oil."<sup>2</sup> We have chosen profit and ease over knowledge and wonder, and now we pay the cost.

The late Bishop Furman Stough used to say that "the longest journey is the one from head to heart", from what we know to what we feel. And yet, at the heart of our own tradition lie the very resources we need to begin to make that journey -- not only in our heads, but in our lives. Listen again to the words of Proverbs: "Ages ago I was set up, at the first, before the beginning of the earth...When he established the heavens, I was there, when he drew a circle on the face of the deep, when he made firm the skies above...then I was beside him, like a master worker, and I was daily his delight." (Prov 8:21, 27-30) At the beginning of all things, before God stretched out the starry heavens and made life to grow upon the earth, Wisdom was beside him. Wisdom, whom the church has understood as Christ, so that God the Father made the earth through the agency of his Son. But this means that wisdom, the divine ordering of all things, precedes their creation. The laws of the natural universe are divinely dictated; they are not disposable, nor can we, mere human beings, hope to alter them at our pleasure or for our convenience. If we seek to abrogate them, they will change us.

William Blake parodied our pretense of control in his etching, "The Ancient of Days," which is printed in your leaflet. The original depicts swirls of orange and gold against the black depths of

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<sup>1</sup> Mendelssohn, *Elijah*, based on assorted passages from Scripture.

<sup>2</sup> Justin Gillis, "Scientists Build Case for Undersea Plumes," *New York Times*, May 29, 2010.

the cosmos, while a naked, bearded man of immense power measures the universe with a compass which resembles lightning. This is not actually an image of God creating the world, but of Urizen, a character Blake created to represent reason and law, as opposed to Los, who represented imagination, which, according to Blake, alone could give access to the holy. Blake's point was simple: that although we might imagine God creating as we create, with mathematics and measure and a compass, nonetheless, God is not bound by our human limitations. It is the soul, not the mind, which is the true measure of creation, because the mind, while powerful and necessary, can only apprehend what can be seen and touched and measured, and what can be deduced from those things.

And yet, the ways of men and women require intuition, the felt experience of passion, for "the heart has reasons which reason cannot know."<sup>3</sup> And the ways of God exceed even those means of apprehension. That is why even the greatest of mystics speak of a "cloud of unknowing" -- because the place in us where God resides exceeds our whole being, so that, when we go there to be with God, what we experience in our mind is a darkness that we cannot penetrate or understand. We are literally ecstatic --beyond our selves -- in a place we can visit, but cannot experience or describe. "There are more things in heaven and earth... than are dreamt of in [our] philosophy." (Shakespeare, Hamlet.)

Not in our philosophy, but in our theology, lie the resources we need to face the dangers of the present time. It is customary to ground care for the earth in the doctrine of creation (as I just did), but the concept of the Trinity may be equally important in helping us to see the true nature of reality.

Today is Trinity Sunday, when we poor fools who wear dog-collars are supposed to try to talk with you about a concept which exceeds all our understanding. Traditionally, the rector trembles in his boots and then delegates this task to the curate. Joan, I am told, preached this Sunday only once or twice in all her time here, but then, she managed better than I in all kinds of ways!

A few weeks ago, I asked the worshipers at our Wednesday service to undertake an exercise which I would like to share with you. Close your eyes for a moment, and think about who you are. Think about the people who have shaped you: your mother and father, your friends, your siblings, those who have nurtured you and those who have challenged you and those who have opposed you. Now, remove one of them. Any one of them. Would you be the person you are without having had them in your life? Who would you be? Do you know?

Obviously, you don't.

We are, each one of us, persons whose identity has been given as well as claimed. When somebody told us they loved us, we learned that we were lovable. When somebody told us we were smart, taught us to be athletes, shared their love of music, they opened rooms in our souls. When other people told us we were worthless or tried to erase our personhood, we fought back, claimed our space, and learned to value our selves beyond what other people think. Or, we believed them, and our souls still bear those scars. Each encounter in our lives shapes who we are; our selves are radically interdependent with our world.

That is the truth at the heart of the Trinity -- that, even for God, identity is a gift of love, a product of encounter. The Cappadocian Fathers -- St. Basil, St. Gregory of Nyssa, and St. Gregory Nazianzen-- taught us to see that God is three Persons in perfect unity of being. Each of the



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<sup>3</sup> Blaise Pascal.

Persons -- the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit -- is distinct from the others, has his own identity. And yet, they are the same in their substance, in being God, and their unity is so close that what one does, they all share in doing. When we say that the Father begets the Son, and that together they breathe the Spirit, and that the Spirit binds them together in love, what we are saying is that they give one another life with perfect mutuality -- sharing who they are perfectly that the others might perfectly live. They are interdependent; that is what gives them their divine freedom.

And we are made in their image, not only men and women, but every thing on this earth: perfectly interdependent. We cannot live without the bee, the earthworm, or the fungus (although, personally, I would not mind trying to live without the cockroach!); we cannot exist without clean water and breathable air; the anger of the poor in Iraq, Iran, and Palestine imperils our own life. We may prefer to exploit this earth than to understand it, but “without [wisdom], the people perish.”<sup>4</sup>

Wisdom stands at the crossroads, writes Solomon, and so do we. Already, our world is changing. Already, plant and animals are moving, habitats are shifting, fisheries are being destroyed, species are vanishing. It is increasingly clear that our way of life is not sustainable, yet we seem to lack the political will to alter it. But there is good news, too: we are human beings, my friends, made in the image of God, and we can choose to change our mind. We can choose to learn, to grow, to develop. When St. Paul writes, “suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us,” (Rom 5: 3-5) he is pointing toward the capacity of each one of us to grow more godlike. Not to stand alone, as an isolated tyrant, but to embrace our interdependence with all that is as the true root and ground of our being, the image of God within us.

And we can make one more choice. We can choose to walk in the way of the cross, choose to let go of our own comforts and certainties for the good of the world. Christian renunciation is not about eating fish on Fridays, but about accepting the transience of our hold on our bodies, our things, on what we insist on calling “our” world. When we fast, we refuse the unjust allocation of food which allows us to grow fat while many starve. When we choose not to buy a thing which is unnecessary, we limit our consumption so that others may have enough. What happened with the Exxon Valdez, what happened with the Deepwater Horizon, were two terrible accidents – and yet, if we continue on our current path of unlimited consumption which pushes us to use technology at the very boundaries of our understanding, accidents will continue to happen – and we will all be complicit. It looks increasingly as if BP made some highly questionable decisions, but we are all among those who made it profitable for them to take the risk.

If we lay our future, our world, into the hands of God, maybe we may have to let go of cheap travel, out-of-season produce, or video games which waste energy we cannot afford to expend at current levels. But we will regain our world, whole and shining, and we will be closer to our God, who made it, and to our fellow creatures, whom we will have allowed to live. We will receive our lives back at the hands of one another -- a God-shaped world in which love triumphs over greed, and wisdom dwells in our hearts forever.

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<sup>4</sup> (Prov 29:18 -- original has “vision” for “wisdom”)