



ST. STEPHEN'S ANGLICAN CHURCH

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The Second Sunday After The Epiphany

Being January 19th, 2014

✠ In The Name of The Father and of The Son and of The Holy Ghost. Amen. ✠

Compare the Wisdom of God, Divine Wisdom, with the wisdom of man and you'll discover they are entirely different commodities. Ironically, in the light of human wisdom, Divine Wisdom often looks like folly.

What's more, obeying the dictates of Divine Wisdom can often make us look silly in the eyes of the world. Acting on the dictates of human wisdom, on the other hand, more often than not spells very serious trouble – trouble of a spiritual kind, as well as trouble of a more temporal nature.

The problem is that all too often human wisdom isn't even a pale imitation of Divine wisdom, but, rather, rationalization. It is our unique facility for persuading ourselves that we are utterly and completely right when, in fact, we are utterly and completely wrong. It is a facility we exercise on a daily basis . . . automatically . . . just as a matter of course.

Our predilection for rationalization enables us to blind ourselves to reality. It is fashionable, for example, to imagine there is something irrational about believing in God. In fact, people who profess a belief, in God are often casually dismissed as crack pots. Science teachers and even college professors, for instance, have been threatened with dismissal if they so much as entertain the proposition that there might be an intelligence behind creation.

This expression "entertain the proposition" that the first life was created by an "intelligent agent"

hardly bespeaks a commitment to claims of the divine authorship of creation. It commits only to an unwillingness to rule out the idea.

Skepticism being a precondition for scientific inquiry, one might expect science teachers to be in trouble if they ruled an intelligent agent entirely out of the equation – especially as the odds against this vast complex universe of ours being an immense cosmic accident are positively overwhelming. Imagining otherwise amounts to a blind and uncompromising faith in an irrational notion – the best definition I have encountered of "superstition."

Four hundred or so years before the birth of Christ, Aristotle – one of the most intelligent men who has ever lived – pondered the very same question: Is there an intelligence behind creation?

His conclusion: Logic applied to the nature of the universe leads irresistibly to the conclusion that, indeed, there is. However, the act of creation is so utterly beyond human capabilities, it would be impossible for us to know him, her or it unless he, she or it chose to reveal himself to us.

This, of course, is what the Bible is all about. You've probably noticed that it does not "prove" in the scientific sense the existence of God. But then it doesn't set out to. It assumes that anybody with half a brain should be able to figure out that there is an intelligence behind creation. The fundamental question the Old Testament addresses is: Does God care? The New Testament, by

contrast, answers the questions: How does God care and what does he care about?

And to answer these latter questions, it was essential for God to reveal himself to us – and he did so in the person of his only begotten son Jesus Christ. It is this revelation to humanity that that we ponder in this season of the Epiphany. And one conclusion we can surely reach is that it doesn't really how Jesus manifests himself to mankind – whether it is through scientific truth or personal appearance – people will find excuses for refusing to, or simply failing to, recognize him.

For example, today's reading from St. Mark's Gospel – his account of Jesus' baptism – makes it plain that God, dramatically and quite explicitly, acknowledged him as "my beloved Son." It is a seminal incident witnessed by a large number of people. And news of it was spread far and wide by John Baptist and his disciples.

Yet despite the dramatic nature of this epiphany, it is clear that within a relatively short time, many of those who witnessed it had dismissed the evidence of their own eyes and ears. Even the Baptist and his disciples wavered, asking Jesus, himself, to confirm the statement they, personally, had heard directly from heaven.

The reason they became skeptical is Jesus didn't behave in quite the way they expected the Son of God to behave. He was modest, unassuming. He didn't talk down to people. And he didn't expect people to kowtow to him. What's more, he didn't hang out with people deemed righteous: clergy and such like. In fact, he seemed to seek out what might be described as "the worse elements" in society. To be sure, he performed some remarkable miracles – even raising the dead. But, then, Elijah did the same and he didn't claim to be the Son of God.

The trouble with Jesus is he didn't conform to conventional human conceptions of appropriate behavior. And, if God doesn't behave like God – if he simply behaves like an ordinary person – how on earth can people be expected to recognize him?

Ironically, we still have the same problem today, but in reverse. Far from finding Jesus too painfully human, many people find it hard to believe

because arrogantly – and quite unjustifiably – they consign God the Father, our Lord Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit to the realm of gnomes, pixies, elves and fairies. For some folk, it seems the Lord of the Rings is a whole lot more believable than the Bible.

Yet far from demonstrating that God does not exist, these common human doubts merely demonstrate the truth of Aristotle's contention that God is utterly different from us. And, indeed, who could be different from us than Jesus.

But if God behaved as we do – if he were simply an infinitely larger, more powerful, more intelligent version of a human being – there would have been no need for an Epiphany. But, then, he would be greedy, selfish, capricious and violent. He would impose his will on us by force and punish us when we stepped out of line. The consequence would be the destruction of the very essence of our humanity, our free will, because we would have no choice but to obey him.

Small wonder, then, that St. Paul – a man learned in both Jewish law and Greek philosophy – reached for Aristotle when he took the Gospel to the intellectuals at Athens University. "I see you have an altar to Aristotle's unknown God," he said, "I can now reveal him to you in the person of Jesus Christ."

God, revealed in Jesus Christ, is nothing like a human being "acting like God." He is infinitely vast and infinitely powerful, of course. But he is also infinitely good, infinitely loving, infinitely kind, infinitely merciful, infinitely wise – utterly perfect, in fact. Everything he does is for others. He heals the sick, feeds the hungry and raises the dead; yet even when ravenously hungry, he refuses to feed himself by turning a stone into a loaf of bread.

The sophisticated Athenians were awestruck, amazed and not a little humbled by their Epiphany – just as we should be when we reflect on our own. AMEN.

To the Only Wise God, Our Saviour, be Glory and Majesty, Dominion and Power, Both Now and Forever. AMEN