

STILLNESS AND THE STORM

"Have you comprehended the expanse of the earth?" (Job 38:18)

"Why are you afraid? Have you no faith?" (Mark 4:40)

Today and for the next couple of weeks we come face to face with some of the miracles of Jesus: Jesus calms a storm, raises someone from the dead, and fails to effect any signs on his own home ground.

Some people have problems with miracle stories. Unlike Job who was properly speechless when God confronted him with the question, "What do you, little man, know about it?" they think they have most of the answers about the origin, history, structure, and prognosis of this Earth of ours. They think we have the laws of nature pretty well figured out and stand ready to answer God, should they be put the question. They assume that these laws are not and cannot be broken. Thus, if we can answer the question, there is no more room for God in such a "scientific" perception of nature. There is no room for miracle: disturbances in the atmosphere work out of their own inner dynamic, storms run their determined course, folks don't walk on water, dead bodies stay dead. And miracle stories, which then become something of an embarrassment, have to be explained away.

That movement which had its start in the 17th century (Spinoza, Descartes, etc), culminating in Europe in the latter part of the 19th, and running into mid-century in this continent, seems to have run its course. New and more searching ways are coming to the fore and I don't mean the fundamentalism and biblical literalism of the religious Right, or the pseudoscience of "creationism".

Something very interesting is happening in the way science is now beginning to look at the universe. Scientism, the quasi religious dogma that scientific empirical truth is the only truth, has been invalidated on at least two counts: existentially and in light of current scientific understanding.

Existentially we can see that science cannot give us any truth that matters. As John Snow, a theologian at EDS, put it recently, science can tell me how to fix my bicycle, but it cannot tell me why I should get up in the morning. Au contraire, it can even be argued (fairly convincingly) that not getting up is the more rational course. On the questions that really matter to us as persons in our human lives science has no answers. It doesn't even recognize the questions as valid within the framework of scientific inquiry. Nevertheless, as long as humans have been human, the questions of meaning, purpose -- of right and wrong -- have mattered; and into the teeth of the apparent meaninglessness of existence humans have always thrown the great "And Yet..." of faith. That's most clearly stated in the Commendation of the Burial Office: "All of us go down to the dust; yet even at the grave we make our song: Alleluia, alleluia, alleluia." (ECUSA BCP, p.499) What evolutionarily distinguishes humans from their primate predecessors is precisely their funeral rites!!

Our current scientific understanding has moved considerably from the view that the universe, both on the cosmic scale and in the inner workings of matter, is understandable in terms of a sticks-and-balls mechanism, the behavior of which can be elucidated and predicted with greater and greater precision. Instead, we see a large, interactive process with a great deal of unpredictability built into the very nature of things. What is even more fascinating is that the observer you and me and the scientist behind the measuring instruments -- become a part of the process. The observer, in a curious way, becomes part of what the outcome of the observation is. Mind, in effect, can be seen as an additional reality of the universe, inseparable from its time_space dimensions. Rather than consisting of a lot of separate objects, the universe is comprehensible as a whole of complex events in which everything relates to everything else.

Thus the 18th century "clockwork universe" has become a useless model quite some time ago. It's just that the junior high school science textbooks have not yet caught up with that fact, and probably never will, because on that (junior high) level we must deal with the simplest explanations that can be illustrated in terms of the limited mechanical model. The limitations of that model, applicable only to a narrow slice of our overall experience, are not made clear. And for many practical purposes, like, say, fixing a bicycle, the limits do not matter. But the moment you start asking questions outside the scope of this narrow slice of reality, the picture changes radically. The scale and scope of the question makes all the difference.

Let me give you a simple illustration. In our local travels, for all practical purposes of giving directions of how to get from where you live to St. Mark's, the earth is flat, North is North, and East is East, and up is up, and down is down. The sun rises and sets over it, and clocks tick off a time that runs smoothly in one direction only. Such is our concrete common sense experience, powerfully reinforced every day of our lives. Yet we do not have to look very far to see its limits. All you have to do is stand on the shore and observe a ship sinking below the horizon. In light of a flat-earth model we've observed a shipwreck at sea. Yet we do not run out to notify the Coast Guard and would look very foolish if we did. So we note that the earth is round, and then cheerfully put that notion out of our minds as we drive back home from the shore, a flat-earth map firmly reinstated in our heads.

One can multiply the examples. (1) If you travel around the globe, at any given spot and at any given time of the voyage the flat-earth experience seems to prevail, but when you get back to where you started from, if you haven't changed your clock and calendar as you went along, you'll find that you have lost or gained a whole day a full 24 hours __ depending on whether you traveled East or westward. (2) A glance at a globe makes it clear that what to us is "up" is the precise opposite for someone in Australia. (3) If you asked me in which direction is the parish hall, I could point to it one way or in precisely the opposite way and be quite correct. It's just that one way is shorter, and the other involves traveling all the way around the globe. And so forth.

What it comes down to when we read the Gospel stories is this: we need not explain them away as mirages, mistakes, or mass hysteria. That would dismiss a sincere account of a very real and deeply held experience of a community -- and experience for which they were willing to lay down their lives if necessary.

On the other hand, we do not have to squeeze the story into our physical reality by postulating a supernatural break in the laws of nature. That would be the equivalent of applying a flat-earth model to a spherical globe and insisting that one had witnessed the sinking of the Nova Scotia ferry and its subsequent magical refloating on the return trip. And then getting into an absolutely pointless argument with the passengers who had been aboard for the trip and insist that there was no sinking and no refloating of any kind.

What we need to understand is that the way a meteorologist describes a storm and the way a storm is referred to in a faith story involves two very different models of reality and uses language in very different ways. The meteorologist speaks of the phenomena our senses perceive and our instruments measure, and within the physical slice of reality that the weatherman deals with he is doing valid and useful work. However, the meteorologist's model is only the physical slice of reality and his models stand to the larger faith reality as a flat-earth map stands to a globe.

And so today's Gospel is not about a weatherman's storms at all. It is about the experience of the Christ of faith in the Christian community which talked about their experience in story, song, and celebration. It is about the divine reality in which our experience as persons is grounded. It's the reality which upholds and sustains the totality of our experience as persons. It is about the

apparently meaningless chaos still being a meaningful part of the divine whole. It points straight to the Creation story of God creating order and light out of the meaninglessness of chaos. It is about faith: faith in this larger reality rather than fear and despair. It is not faith in magic, but in God. The question to the disciples and to us is and always remains, "Why are you afraid? Have you no faith?" That's why the most basic prayer is, "Lord, we believe. Help our unbelief."

Amen.

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