

Sermon for YR C / PR 20
St. George's / September 19, 2010
RLS

I bet you are familiar with the famous paintings on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel at the Vatican. All of it is the handiwork of the Renaissance artist Michelangelo.

Whether or not you have been to the Vatican to see this masterpiece, you have probably seen images of the most widely recognized fresco on that ceiling.

It is called *The Creation of Adam*, and it depicts the Book of Genesis account of God imparting life to humanity.

The painting is of God, and typical of the imagination of sixteenth century Europe, God is a white man with a beard, of course, surrounded by angels in heaven and reaching forth his finger to touch the hand of Adam reclining on the grassy earth.

There is a popular music group named Counting Crows. They have a song that references this painting called, "When I Dream of Michelangelo."

The words to the song go like this:

I dream of Michelangelo when I am lying in my bed;
I see God on the ceiling; I see angels overhead.
And He seems so close as He reaches out his hand;
But we are never quite as close as we are led to understand.

I can appreciate the sentiment in this lyric.

Some people long for God and lament that this longing seems unfulfilled.
And very often we have more questions than answers about God.

"He seems so close as He reaches out his hand;
But we are never quite as close as we are led to understand."

So there is here a kind of humility in suggesting some distance between what we *claim* to know of God and what we can *really* know of God.

One senses a humble recognition of the dangers in excessive religious confidence.

I wonder if the lyric is saying something like, “You committed religious types may think you are close to God, but surely God is a lot bigger than any box you might try to squeeze him into.”

There is a prevailing mindset in certain segments of culture that suggests the more fervent one is in his or her spiritual convictions - the more definitive one is in their religious beliefs - the more prone one is to intolerance, perhaps even violence, of other religions and worldviews.

As if to reinforce this concern about the dangers of passionate religious belief, the world is always serving up prime examples such as – most recently – that ridiculous pastor in Florida who threatened a public burning of the Koran, the sacred text of Muslims.

It was a profoundly unchristian idea, and stunts like that only serve to harm the mission of the church in the eyes of so many.

To many non-Christians, it makes Christians look ignorant and silly.

“We are never quite as close to God as we are led to understand.”

This is a very real issue not only in culture but within the church today.

We are those who take some pride in being “thinking Christians,” right?

We also want to be respected by mainstream society.

This is a high value for us.

How do we with integrity uphold and share the unique claims of the gospel in a way that does not make us out to be dogmatic fundamentalists?

I think such a question is heightened when we come across a text from the Bible such as 1 Timothy today.

This is the first of two correspondences we have from St. Paul to his young missionary protégé, Timothy.

In the passage we hear today, Paul is exhorting Timothy to lead a life worthy of his calling by God who wants all people “to be saved, to come to the knowledge of the truth.”

“For there is one God, and there is one mediator between God and humankind, Christ Jesus....”

While this may sound like fairly standard Bible-talk, the sort of line we are used to hearing in church, I think we have to sit and linger over the words a minute and realize that they are a scandal to many modern ears.

“There is one.” There is one God. There is one mediator – that is, one way that God has chosen to redeem the human race, through Jesus.

“There is one.” Those may be three of the most disconcerting and challenging words to the mindset of many church-goers I know.

“There is one.”

This runs so against the grain of the way we are encouraged to think these days.

From college freshman orientation seminars to civic leadership to the boards of various organizations many of us serve on to the bridge club and the golfing outing and the dinner party... to say “there is one” is a recipe for getting yourself in hot water.

Let’s face it, many of us do not actually believe this.

Many of us go along with a popular cultural consensus that God works in all religions and that God saves different people in different ways.

So how do we deal with a text like this today: “There is one.”

This embarrasses us, doesn’t it?

A friend of mine and one of the best Christian cultural observers I know is Ken Myers, executive producer of Mars Hill Audio Journal, and someone who has twice visited St. George’s to do some teaching.

In a recent article, Ken mentions driving down the interstate somewhere in the southeast and spotting a billboard that announced:

“A Church for People Who Don’t Like Church.”

That sign prompts the question: what exactly is it that people don’t like about church that you could remove and still have church?

Ken wonders what it would be like if the NFL came up with a slogan: “Football for people who don’t like football.”

So if we could develop a way of thinking about church so that it is rid of the stuff we don’t really like about church – such as belief that “there is one” – then we might have something: “church for people who don’t like church.”
But what kind of church would that be?

We may not like exclusive claims about Christianity.

It makes it hard for us in the world out there, right?

We don’t want to be “those kinds of Christians,” holier than thou, close-minded, the kind who think it alright to burn the Koran.

Yet as those who seek to be culturally engaged Christians, it is important for us to examine the kind of assumptions underlying a view that shrinks from or simply rejects the possibility of definitive knowledge of God.

So let us ask, where do we get our assumptions that would lead one to doubt we could ever be quite as close to God “as we are led to understand?”

It is as vitally important to know both *what* we think and *why* we think what we think. To think about our thinking as Christians (rather than simply to assert our opinions or insist upon our desires) is a great ministry for the church in our contemporary context.

In the last century, few church leaders or scholars have engaged in such critical discernment with as much wisdom and humility as Lesslie Newbigin.

Newbigin enjoyed a long career as a British theologian and missionary.

Four decades in India, becoming bishop of the Church in South India/

Returned to Great Britain in the mid-1970's and was impressed with the dramatically increased secularization that continues unabated to this day.

His reflections on this inspired important writing on contemporary ways of thinking about reality for the last years of his ministry.

In recent days I have been reading his book, *Proper Confidence: Faith, Doubt, and Certainty in Christian Discipleship*, and have found it very helpful to me.

Newbigin seeks to chart a path for claims about God that runs between the limp relativism of much 20th Protestant theology and the uncritical dogmatism of much Christian fundamentalism.

For most of the past 500 years – since the age of the Enlightenment – at the heart of western thinking about reality has been that skepticism and doubt are the path to knowledge.

If it cannot be proven under a microscope or through a telescope or by physical observation or through logical reasoning, then it is not objectively true and is merely a subjective thing.

And so a hierarchy of knowledge developed: objective truth – such as the laws of gravity, have a higher weight (pun intended) than subjective claims such a belief in God or theology or moral virtue or even the arts.

But Newbigin, among many others, notes that there is an illogical assumption here: that nothing can be positively known outside of science and natural reason.

Well, how do we know that?

Science cannot prove that. So it is an assumption based on faith.

It is a great irony that many of those who most forcefully atheistic or agnostic about God are virtual fundamentalists on a purely scientific worldview.

Alas, we are now living in yet another epochal shift in thinking about reality, an era known as post-modernity.

Today the question is no longer “How do we know the truth?” but “Does truth even exist?”

It seems that the western bias toward skepticism and doubt have run their course even through science and reason and left us with nothing to believe in at all.

And yet I think it is precisely because of our current age’s confusion about truth and knowledge that authentic Christianity has a God-given opportunity and clear mission for the world today.

We have an alternative account of reality that neither restricts all knowledge to what can be objectively proven nor succumbs to the relativistic impulse to doubt all definitive universal truth claims in the first place.

I have a great yearning that we could be the types of discerning Christians who might be able to engage the world with the gospel winsomely and confidently; that we would not be intimidated by those who are enslaved with certain patterns of thinking about what can be known and not known,

For we can know all the science and all the theory in the world, and not know Jesus as the one.

We can read the whole Bible over and over and be conversant with all the great theologians and not know Jesus as the one.

And here, the Counting Crows song is on the money: We are not as close to God as we are led to believe.

But what if the Christian’s confidence in what we know of God is born less in our capacity to know God than in our faith that God has nevertheless chosen to be known. “No one has ever seen God; the only God, who is at the Father’s side, he has made him known” (John 1.18).

Newbigin offers a telling example.

We can discuss an absent person in a manner that leaves us in control of the conversation, we can say all sorts of things about this person and people who do not know this one will form their opinions.

But suppose that person suddenly enters the room unexpectedly. We must either stop talking or change the way we are talking. We might even have to listen to the other person speak to us. And that would be a different kind of knowledge altogether.

The confidence proper to Christian witness is not one based on demonstrable proofs and sophisticated propositions. Rather it is a confidence born of a personal relationship with the One whose nature transcends science and whose love surpasses all logic.

That God would come to us in the person of Jesus of Nazareth, would die on the cross for our sins and the sins of the whole world, would rise to life again on the resurrection and call us into being as his church – that is not knowledge that can be contained by science and reason.

It can only be demonstrated by love. And love is real. You can know it even if it is very elusive to the microscope.

The fact is that there are other kinds of knowing and more humanly potent kinds of knowing than what scientific observation and theoretical knowledge can impart.

And the most potent kind of knowledge of all comes from personal relations.

I might not be very good at describing in precise physical detail the face of my wife. But I can pick her out in a crowd of four hundred here in a nanosecond. I know her in a different way than in a merely scientific way, and that way is more powerful and more real.

And so it is with our God who comes to us as Jesus.

God has entered the room unexpectedly – not as concept or moral principle or gassy spirit, nor as mere book or invading conqueror - but as a humble, loving person who died and rose again for you and me.

And Christian story of how God does this IS unique. It simply is.

We can have a gracious confidence about that - a confidence marked not by condescension or intolerance but by love and forgiveness, gratitude and trust, a confidence expressed less through argument and proof than through our gracious witness and testimony.

It is a proper confidence the world needs now.