

Evolution and Epiphany

A sermon preached by the Very Rev. James A. Diamond at Christ Church Cathedral, Cincinnati, Ohio, on Sunday, February 12, 2006.

Today, hundreds of clergy across our country from a wide spectrum of Christian denominations are sponsoring what they are calling “Evolution Sunday” during which congregations will review why modern science is compatible with Holy Scripture. It is not a coincidence that today is the 197th anniversary of the birth of Charles Darwin. I do not think it is necessary to drive home the compatibility issue to you.

The Episcopal Church is a community of Christians who are on a life long quest of discernment. We are open to a variety of sources of truth and we are forever looking at the grays of issues while others around us demand black or white. I believe that we also caught in the gray zone in the evolution wars which are now being raised in the courts and in the classrooms. By intentionally blurring the line between faith and science some of our fellow Christians are following a political agenda to destroy the wall between church and state in the name of evangelism. They do this at the expense of our public school children and defile the intentions of the founders of our republic. Let me be clear. I do not believe there is a place for theology in a junior high school science curriculum but outside the classroom, as a good Episcopalian, I understand the ambiguity of individual opinion.

I accept Charles Darwin’s scientific explanation of evolution. It makes rational sense as science should but as a person of faith I believe that God must have been involved in the beginning and I believe that the design of creation is so elegant that it must have been touched by the divine and I believe that God who cares so much, who continues to be so involved with us, must have influenced what science describes as evolution. And that is what is so insidious about the notion of Intelligent Design. Intelligent Design plucks at the strings of our faith and then entwines them in a cat’s cradle of politics.

Since the enlightenment, reason has entered our perceptions of truth and the scientific method, a methodical process of observing evidence and testing and reproducing hypothesis from that evidence have helped to shape our language of truth. The scientific method cannot be applied to scripture nor can scripture be used to interpret science. Genesis and Darwin are compatible when we use the appropriate language for each source of truth. If we find Darwin lacking, and that is certainly possible, we should turn to the scientific method for a better model, not to scripture which has never made a claim to be science.

The text from the first chapter of the Gospel of Mark which we have just heard read offers a perfect example of what I have been saying. A leper comes to Jesus begging to be cleaned and Jesus is moved by compassion. I choose to make you clean and the leprosy is cured. That is a miracle. Can God choose to perform a miracle? I believe that to be so. Will this spontaneous cure that we hear about withstand the scrutiny of the scientific method? Even if there were evidence could it be tested, used to predict a

similar phenomena, and reproduced in the laboratory? The very suggestion is absurd because the language is wrong. But can we learn truth from this cure? Oh yes, of course. There is an abundance of truth in this lesson which we describe in the language of faith. We learn through the example of Jesus that God is moved by compassion. We hear that God can violate natural law through a process that is completely mysterious to us. But apparently God does not do so for the sake of any one individual but rather to inspire faith in others.

By stepping back and looking at the very spare description that Mark gives us of any of the Gospel stories in his gospel and seeing that in the context of Mark's time we also see and learn that Jesus respected tradition. He knew that regardless of what went on between him and the man with leprosy tradition required that that leper go to a priest who would perform a ritual cleaning and declare the man clean. We also learn from the end of the gospel lesson that it is nothing new that when we hear the word of God directly and see evidence in God's way of what God will do for us we still have a great proclivity to be disobedient. Asking to keep something confidential, we broadcast it to the world. It was ever thus.

An aspect of the many healing stories of Mark reveal another truth to us, the isolation that often comes with illness. We are a culture nearly obsessed with health and with media delivering the message that we are responsible for our own good health, and so underneath this there is also another message, the implied message of blame. If you are sick it is your own fault. You should have taken better care of yourself and this would not have happened. The leper personified this phenomenon in Jesus' time. People living with leprosy in that time were completely shunned. They were known to be untouchable. For a leper, even a cured leper, to reenter society it was still necessary to go to that priest and get the seal of approval. Isolation and rejection is how, until recently, we have treated people living with AIDS. The example of how we regard people with AIDS brings us full circle in the examination of the responsible use of the languages of faith and science. Science teaches us that AIDS is a communicable disease, that there are certain precautions, all of us, whether we have the disease or not, should take to prevent its spreading.

There is no judgment or social sanction in these inclusions of science. It is simply putting out verifiable evidence. But from the Gospel of Mark, we hear that Jesus touched the leper. He did not cut himself off from the leper or try to isolate him. Jesus stretched out his hand and offered the afflicted man healing. That is the language of faith, speaking truth to us all. Amen.

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