

Closed Minds and the Open Word

sermon digest

November 13, 2011

2 Corinthians 3:2- 4:7

larry dipboye

After our discussion Wednesday of mistranslations in the King James Version of the Bible, Mike Broyles reminded me of the famous gaffe in Jerome's fifth century Vulgate translation of the Bible in Latin. Exodus 34:29 describes Moses coming down from Sinai with the two tablets of the covenant in his hands, "Moses did not know that the skin of his face shone because he had been talking with God." The Hebrew description of the shining skin of Moses' face is derived from the word *horn*, the origin in Latin is the same as cornucopia, horn of plenty. The writer probably intended an image of horn-shaped rays of light coming from Moses' face, but Jerome's Latin translation gave Moses actual horns. Numerous medieval artists repeated the error by portraying Moses like a goat with horns protruding from his head. 1,000 years after Jerome's blunder, Michelangelo produced a marble sculpture of Moses with horns placed at the tomb of Pope Julius II.

If Jerome had paid attention to Paul's illustration in defense of his ministry to Christians at Corinth, he would have recognized his mistake. Paul cited the passage in Exodus 34 to note the glory (*doxa*) of God shining on the face of Moses as he came from Mount Sinai and the direct presence of God. Because of the belief that death follows a direct encounter with God, the people were afraid to speak face-to-face with Moses; so he put a veil over his face to shield the people from the light of God radiating from his face. You can imagine Moses going around with an Islamic Berqa over his head.

Paul then takes issue with the way people read the Law and brings the story to bear on the matter of interpretation in his time and place. Moses is long gone, but people are still keeping a veil in place when they read the old covenant. They continue in fear and are stuck in another age and ancient understanding of the Word. "Now the Lord is the Spirit and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom." So, we are able to view the glory of God with unveiled faces as a reflection in the mirror of God's people. People created and living out the image of God are in the process of being transformed from one degree of glory to another.

Paul was a biblical scholar. In this one letter, he cites fifteen references and forty-six allusions to the Old Testament. This rabbi from Tarsus calls for an open mind before the open Word of the gospel of Christ. Our new freedom to perceive the glory of God in the face of Christ is a gift of God's Spirit. As the veil of the Temple was torn open at the crucifixion of Christ, the veil over the ancient scriptures has been removed by God's Spirit.

The Bible requires interpretation. Jerome's humorous blunder has become the classic example of the human struggle to interpret and the human tendency to misunderstand the Bible. If we are to take the Bible seriously and to treat it as the primary source of our faith in God, we are faced with the task of interpretation. Like other important documents in our lives, the Bible is written in human language that calls us to read for understanding. Even if the Bible had been written in the current idiom of American English, it would still require an effort to understand. But every generation of the faithful has been confronted with the further obstacle that the Hebrew scriptures were written in Hebrew and Aramaic and the Christian in Koine Greek, none of which are commonly known or used among us today. So, we tend to stumble in getting from the writing to the reading, from there to here.

In trying to rescue the Bible from the Church, the Reformers spoke of the "perspicuity," the transparency, of scripture that makes it available to laity. Perhaps Luther overestimated the ability of ordinary folks to read with understanding, but I doubt that he intended or encouraged ignorance of the best scholarship available. Luther was a Bible scholar. Although he taught the priesthood of the believer, he also recognized the importance of people who devote their lives to biblical interpretation. "In the tongues of all the peoples May the message bless and heal, As devout and patient scholars More and more its depths reveal" (Ferdinand Blanchard's hymn, "Word of God, Across the Ages").

In *The Good Book* Harvard University Chaplain Peter Gomes (p. 26ff) describes the task of understanding the Bible as an "interpretive triangle" in which we must find the common denominator that connects the text, the author, and the reader. Contrary to a commonly held opinion, the Bible does not magically interpret itself; it requires historical and linguistic tools to get to the meaning at the point of composition and theological insight to locate the meaning (or irrelevance) to our time and place. Gomes observes that even if one claims an infallible biblical text, the task of interpretation is

necessary.

Gomes warns (p.36ff) against three common dangers of interpretation: *bibliolatry*, *literalism*, and *culturalism*. The Bible is not a substitute for God that should become the object of our *worship*. Thumping on a closed book is usually a deflection of attention away from biblical teaching to the opinion of the thumper. Even in the first Christian generation, Paul recognized the dangers of literalism, which he called “the ministry of death, chiseled in letters on stone tablets.” He described his ministry of a new covenant, “not of letter but of spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life.” If we are to avoid *literalism*, we must try to move from then to now, from the words of the author to the meaning of our time and place. Meaning often lies beyond the letter of the text. Gomes further warns against *culturalism*, that elevates cultural practices of the ancient biblical world to the level of the ideal practice for every age and place. The institution of slavery was practiced and affirmed in the Bible even though the cultural practice contradicted the high view of the human person in creation and redemption. In Luke 4:18, Jesus identifies his ministry with the liberation of slaves, “He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free.” Also, issues of science and faith as well as numerous other social issues are radically affected by the necessity of leaving the biblical culture behind.

The treasure of the gospel comes in human containers. The image of treasure in clay jars was a common metaphor in Paul’s world to the human condition of weakness and ignorance. Far from insisting that they have God in jar, which would make God something less than the one who controls the jar, Paul speaks to the miracle of God that allows the truth of God’s Word to be carried in earthen vessels. On the one side, Paul was confident that, in spite of the brittle, limited, human vessel, the gospel the content is “treasure” distinct from the vessel in which it is borne. On the other hand, the rabbi is aware of human limitation, the earthen vessel that keeps us from ever claiming absolute possession of God or a final understanding of the ways of God in the world. Both the treasure and the earthen vessels are continuing factors in the struggle to understand the Word of God.

We are faced with two lopsided approaches to the Bible that need each other to find the balance that leads to understanding. For people who see nothing unique or valuable in the collection of documents that we identify as Bible, only the earthen vessel is significant. The Bible is no different from other collections of documents from antiquity and should be treated as an antiquated curiosity that has nothing to say to our time and place. The earthen vessel to which Paul referred was his own human limitation rather than the human element of the ancient scriptures, but the reference to the Bible still applies. The human limitation of the authors of scriptures is also a factor that must be weighed in the balance of understanding.

According to the physicist-priest John Polkinghorn, one of the major problems of our secular age is “reductionism.” The reductionist is a “nothing but” sort of person who sees everything in its simplest form as a collection of parts that finally mean nothing. Polkinghorn argues that the whole is always greater than the sum of the parts. Somehow the Bible is always greater than the clay vessels that wrote it or carry it. You cannot break down the realities of the world we live into simple pieces that mean nothing but nothing. The priest in Polkinghorn, then, looks for the treasure in the earthen vessel.

The primary problem that we face in biblical interpretation today is the opposite extreme, claiming only the treasure of God’s Word while denying the significance of the human earthen vessel in which it is contained. Bishop John Shelby Spong cites the statement of Jerry Falwell: “The Bible is the inerrant . . . word of the living God. It is absolutely infallible, without error in all matters pertaining to the practice, as well as in areas such as geography, science, history, etc.” (*Rescuing the Bible from Fundamentalism*, 25-26). The claim of perfect, historical and scientific accuracy in the Bible has led to a modern war on science based on claims that have no support either by the letter or the spirit of scripture.

In my first pastoral experience as a second year seminarian, I recall the day that Grady Deaton called me aside to ask a profound theological question. Grady wanted to know, “Was Jesus God or man?” Just that simple! He wanted a one-word response.

I had majored in religion at Baylor and made A’s in theology in seminary and was somewhat familiar with the creeds of Christian history. You should have seen the look on Grady’s face when I

provided the classroom answer that early Christians affirmed Jesus as God and man. From that day forward, for Grady, I established my place in the church prime heretic. If I had been a little older and wiser, I probably would have engaged in conversation to expose the complexity of the Gospels on the pure identity of Jesus.

But my response today would still be the same. If the Word become flesh to dwell among us, identified in John's Gospel with Jesus the Christ, if even the eternal Logos has come to us in earthen vessel, it is time we tried to get our arms around the whole Bible, the Word of God in the earthen vessels of human language and human hands.