

67

A LECTURE
ON THE BIBLE IN THE MODERN WORLD

by

The Very Reverend Francis B. Sayre, Jr.
Dean, Washington Cathedral

written July, 1977
to be delivered in Australia, Fall, 1977

"There went up a mist from the earth, and watered the whole face of the ground. And then the Lord God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living soul."

Genesis 2:6-7

What more beautiful insight could there be of who we are, you and I? And of the double mystery of life and spirit! As always the Bible goes right to the heart of existence as we know it, spanning the eons with a marvelous knowledge of God, and infusing history with holiness.

Embedded in the glass of a stained-glass window in Washington Cathedral is another perspective on Creation. This very considerable work of art was the gift of the head of the American space agency, to commemorate man's first step off this planet in our generation. Enshrined in its eloquent design is a stone picked up on the first landing on the moon. It has been dated at an age of three-and-a-half billion years, three-fourths of what is now thought to be the age of the whole universe! It was found to include a metal, pyroxferroite, not found upon this earth, which must have reached the moon from somewhere else in space than from this little orb.

Wernher von Braun, whose pioneering rocketry is responsible for putting the first men on the moon, once rather neatly compared those two insights about us, who we are and where we came from. He said that there is no conflict between science and the Bible at all; the one explores creation, the other the Creator.

Well, that's a comforting thought, and perfectly true; but all the same I'm afraid we're much better at deciphering the rocks than we are at figuring out the secrets of the soul. The Bible's discipline is much more

profound and difficult than that even of an Albert Einstein, vast genius tho' he was.

This was brought home to us in the United States--and perhaps to you as well--by the sad experience of the war in Viet Nam. As to technical skills our performance there left little to be desired. I remember all too well, after my last visit to you here in Australia, flying out over the port encampments and military stockpiles deposited along the Indo-China coast. It was evident that every technology had been massively mobilized to work our will in that Asian land. Yet between the inhabitants of that land and the soldiers we sent to share a common fate there seemed an almost unbridgeable gulf fixed between their will and ours. It was a profound divergence of purpose, of manners and of morals that seemed to run as deep almost as the self-awareness of mankind. So that thoughtful people were forced to reflect that while jets and jeeps easily cross the man-made boundaries of this world, it is infinitely more difficult for the little chariots of the human spirit.

Different peoples on different continents separated through the ages by their special histories, their modes of faith, their varying allegiance to the sacred gift of life: we see them now as ships that pass silently in the night. All so easy to carry those guns and troops across the sea! But oh how hard to bridge the chasm of divergent understandings of who we are and what we're meant to be.

In body, Earth is fiercely one: knit together in her precious envelope of air and water and stored-up energy. But in spirit she is like those great continental land-masses that now are discovered to be drifting slowly apart across the fiery core at the heart of all. What force may stitch together the unplumbed trenches in the ocean floor, and bind into one the living soul of humanity?

Surely as God sits at His great loom, the Bible is part of his design for bringing mankind together. Not for a chosen race only, and not for any single church alone, does He weave the infinite strands of His love into the breath of life. Hidden in that great compendium of fable and fact, of fancy and faith, is the glowing secret of His life: shrouded ever in inexhaustible mystery, yet leaping forth in fresh power like some old volcano suddenly bathed in fire.

As I have watched our yearning world from the vantage of a lovely Gothic tower in the capital of my own nation, it has seemed to me that the holiness of the Bible for our time lies in three utterly precious threads which God keeps weaving together. Let me take them up one by one.

I

First is the primordial recollection of our roots. How can we know who we are unless we perceive whence we came? Tracing down those roots, as you're well aware, has become a favorite pastime these days among blacks in America, not to mention whites in Australia!

I remember bending down at the base of Ayers Rock, in the remoteness of your Northern Territory, to enter a cave where primitive people of long ago had portrayed in simple pictures the meaning they had found to life. How eloquent, in the age-old silence there, was their sense of kinship with sun and moon and stars and the beasts with which they shared the blessing of existence. No less skilled than ourselves, the forgotten draftsmen had there delineated in succinctest form the wondrous mystery that is the womb of all creation.

So have aboriginals done the world around. Yet none so poignantly as those ancient Hebrew forefathers of ours who painted with prophesy instead of chalky clay. What shining mirror of the spirit disclosed to

them that we are not hunters only, nor hunted upon the barren veldt, but creatures half of earth and half celestial: made in God's own image yet tinged with dust as perishable as the fleeting desert bloom. 'Tis in the Garden of Eden deep deep within ourselves the direst battle is waged; between our longing for the truth that makes us free, and the cloying self that steals that truth away to build some private Babel of disobedience. Good and evil, love and hate, locked in deadly combat as long as time persists, until we are at last by grace restored to the garden of God's making.

That's who we are! That's what "Adam" means in the Book of Genesis: "Mankind," who bears the mark of divinity upon his brow, and yet is mired in his own chicanery, like a helpless pony caught in quicksand. "The good that I would do, I do not," said St. Paul, "and the evil that I would not, that I do. Who shall help me from this abyss?"

Is it not the world we know all too well that is limned so accurately in the Bible's primeval reminiscence? Is it not your heart and mine that are forever caught in that daily dilemma that tugs us first toward God, then drives us with dread perversity toward perdition? What realists were those old Jews! Blinking at nothing in the world, not even at themselves!

Some of you may have made your pilgrimage to Bethlehem in the Holy Land. There you can see at the place where Christ was born the kind of realism I mean. Pious generations have built a great church where once the manger stood. But the door of that splendid shrine is scarce four feet high.

All because, they will tell you, armed men once rode within on their horses and laid waste the holy precinct. So now you have to stoop as low to enter as did God Himself when he deigned to be a little babe in this evil vale.

Surely it's faith that knows how to reckon with the world far more than cleverness or even virtue, for faith alone discerns the great Ally who comes to march at our side, who stoops with us and lifts again. He is the root in which our soul is grounded, and our world redeemed afresh.

I have often wished in my country that those who wielded power during the Watergate crisis of recent lamented shame, might have read their Bibles to better avail. They would have known that in naked power there is no salvation, but only in obedience. Not in management but in freedom does the spirit dwell, and unless our purpose is in consonance with God's design, it is in vain.

Friends of America in other lands are often at a loss to explain the frightful trauma of that Watergate experience among my countrymen. But you will understand the depth of it when you remember that democracy was planted on the North American continent by people who had fled a disillusioned and oppressive Europe, and done so for the most part in the name of God. They were people who still read their Bibles, who believed in a sacred destiny upon the bosom of their unformed land. They aimed to establish a fairer reign, where each sacred soul would be equally precious and utterly sovereign in the company of his fellows. The leader would be elected by them all, ordained as it were a sort of secular high priest, to be the steward of an ethic and a government that rested squarely upon the sanctity of life and the inviolability of each man's conscience, subject only to the common weal.

Such is the high calling of an American President. He is much more than merely Chief Executive; more than commander-in-chief of our armed forces or ceremonial head of the nation. He is, in effect, the lay bishop of a very wide and scattered community of faith. There are 215 million people in his diocese, and over all he exercises a moral suasion that we would never entrust to either Pope or king, but rest instead upon the office of

a mortal man who though he was once but plain politician, is called upon his election to be both prophet and priest to the people over whom he must preside.

When that great trust is betrayed, then truly may this lay church of ours collapse: that brave new church in the open new world where all, whoever they were, had thought to find their spiritual home beyond the crimp of narrow dogma or self-stuffed prelacy. For a time it seemed to many Americans that the very root of what we thought to be our noble and reverent society had been destroyed. For we had forgotten what we wrote on our coins: "In God we trust." Forgotten the mystery that is Divine, and settled for a mess of worldly pottage that at this late date had seduced not the government only, but vast segments of the society whose mores the government no more than reflects.

In these recent days men still reach for their Bibles, but not to read, not to ponder. The Word of God is paraded out for ceremonial occasions or as the token of an oath in court, or a bride's bouquet. But who remembers Abraham, who like Adam before him is the image of our race? Soren Kierkegaard, the thoughtful Dane who delved so deeply into the secrets of the Scriptures, opened, for me at least, the key as to why Abraham is called the father of a sacred people. It was because of his utter obedience to God, to the final mystery he could not understand.

When he took Isaac to Mount Moriah, he was required to go beyond his love for the boy, the darling of his old age--beyond all human value that is, beyond the deepest treasure we can cherish on this earth. But more even than that! A pragmatic age like ours would imagine that the lesson here is only that self is to be sacrificed to the higher law of ethics. But no,

that is not the point of the story either: for what God laid upon Abraham was that he must go beyond even ethics as well. What ethic after all could ever require the murder of a son? The obedience of Abraham had thus to be deeper than law, deeper than reason, deeper than every human instinct. It had to reach right down to the roots of Creation, to the ultimate mystery whom we call God, which is the womb of all life, of all meaning of any kind. To that Abraham was true!

So if it seems to you that the signs of our times reveal a disorientation of the spirit that may well prove to be disastrous, then it is worth remembering that in Holy Writ there is marked a path back to the source of Time's troubling stream. The rifts of war, the shallowness of peace: these are redeemed only in recollection and in consonance with the lovely mystery which ever presides over history's destiny, and which we know as the Providence of God.

II

I love that word: "Providence." We have a city in America named for God's Providence. It's a beautiful word because it suggests the constant continuance of the generative force of universe. The mystery is renewed moment by moment. And that is the second thread of God's weaving to which I would call your attention.

It is a static and sterile faith that believes God did it all once long ago; so that you don't need to think much about it now. And it is an empty and decaying society that has not within itself the means of regenerating the ethos of its inner character and hence its outward unity.

When once you've distilled the basic agreements of a people in a

set of customs and conventions, and enshrined them in a Constitution or the convocation of a Parliament, the question is then, what keeps it all alive? What common stem nourishes all those independent branches and leaves and little twigs that always seem in any community to keep shooting forth in their several private directions? Without a living coherence that can keep on growing, no fabric of society can very long endure.

Once again, the Bible told us that! Was it not on the plain of Shinar that men essayed to build a tower? A tower so high that it might reach right into Heaven, so that earth-bound builders might climb up on their bootstraps, as it were, to the very place of God, there to usurp His authority and might, and rule the universe in His stead.

Oh, the eternal pride of mankind! The price of his arrogance is man's brokenness: When every individual, every nation aspires to sit upon the throne, there can be nothing but conflict 'twixt the rivals, and the end is Babel, when no two neighbors understand each other in any degree. It hardly takes a psychiatrist to see that the character of that society is chaos; or as St. Paul put it, the wages of sin is death.

A quarter of a century ago, when my ministry in Washington was just beginning, it was a time of frightful Babel in our land. There was a tower-builder then named Senator Joe McCarthy who presumed to think that he might climb above the rule of Law and himself become the arbiter of our country's safety and his fellow-citizen's probity. The era which now goes by McCarthy's name, is synonymous with the whole destructive idea of rule by innuendo and guilt by association. So infectious is fear that when Senator Joe was on TV every day in the course of the famous Army hearings, there was precious little frankness in communication, even among friends.

America was threatened with the anarchy of arrogance. Babel!

It is a disease that bids fair to undermine the invisible compact

that lies at the root of any human association. Think of the dimension of the problem when you have a whole continent full of people, as you do and as we do too. In our case it's 215 million souls who have to live together in our nation. And if they be unaware of the Providence of God over all, what unity shall ever be so strong as to overcome the divisive egotism that causes Texans with their natural gas to be very unfeeling about the urgent need of winter heat in New England at the opposite end of the country; or farmers in Kansas to write to the newspapers that the best thing to do with a bankrupt New York City is to saw it off, tow it out into the Atlantic, and let it sink.

If that be a sample of the current and indeed perpetual problem of every society, then it behooves not clergymen only, but politicians and bankers and businessmen as well to discern that fresh Pentecost that can mend the brokenness, and bridge the widening rifts that forever jeopardize our common life. What blessed water shall renew the well of the spirit, humble and holy before our God?

My teen-aged son is the proud owner of a small sailboat, which he christened with the curious name Bikpella. The word comes from that set of scriptures published by the Australian Bible Society in pidgin English for use among the people of myriad tongues on the islands to the north of you. "Bikpella Jesàs" is the sobriquet of Christ which all could understand regardless of one's native language. "Bigfellow Jesus"!

Yes indeed: among the intolerable babble of human words, there remains the pristine Word of God, who is the Great Lord Christ. He it is who gathers up the fragments into one basket; His the lingua franca understood of all His children, regardless of race or clime. He speaks to us today, of healing and of help.

What an incandescent contemporary is that Holy Bible, where first we find the saving Word, as fresh as the song of a lark, as near as the whisper of hope in the promise of youth, and as universal as Creation itself.

III

Hope, surely that is the third of the threads God is weaving for our time. The first was memory: memory of the wondrous mystery whence we are born. Then came the burning in our hearts, like the disciples at Emmaus when they recognized the risen Christ incognito in their midst--and in the knowing Him knew one another. Holiness is vivid and alive, ever new. And of that springs hope at the last. What company of mankind may think to live without that?

But in neither Testament is hope a cheap or sentimental thing. Let flabby faith mark well the fact that the promise is never given except following the Judgment. After Armageddon, the remnant. After the Cross, resurrection. Only when man's little tower is utterly exposed, totally collapsed, is Pentecost given: solely and freely the gift of God.

If one is to think of the role of the Bible in the world just now, how can one possibly avoid contemplating the horrendous cataclysm that looms on the horizon of the planet, creeping ever more blackly toward us like ~~like~~ some giant thunderstorm of doom. Body-counts in Viet Nam were as nothing compared to the moral vacuum that can allow the steady spread of nuclear armament all over the world. No murky prophet, no secret seer of Revelation could ever have envisaged the holocaust that even now approaches. Is man so fine that having pre-empted into his own hands the Promethian power of God he will administer it with the same loving care as his Maker? I'm afraid we know the answer. Whether by accident or whether by blackmailing design, the awful detonation is bound to come one day. Little will any of us care if it be by fission or by fusion or by the

Sayre lecture page eleven

latest horror: a neutron bomb which is designed to destroy not property so much as people--God's children like you and me.

By these bombs, and the threat of them, are we hopelessly severed from one another, and from the peace of God. Whether or when the final cataclysm may come is really irrelevant, for the tragedy is now! This little globe twirling in the heavens could not survive unless it were one in all its parts. Yet the inhabitants thereof lock themselves irretrievably into their separate boxes, behind their walls of enmity and avarice, utterly cut off from each other and from the miracle that gave them life.

It is out of the ache of this present despair that hope is born, not of us but of the bounty of God. He it is who sends the dream to sleeping, weeping Jacob of a ladder 'tween him and heaven whereon are angels ascending and descending, linking Man once more with his maker. God who leads Moses across an angry sea to the Promised Land; God who summons old men not to faint and the young not to stumble ever again.

Oh blessed Word of God that plumbs the very depths of our agony, to lift us at last to a new possibility of life. That's the Bible for our age and all ages. It is the handbook of God's own Son, who in his own life--and death embodied every syllable of his Father's Word, for He was himself the Mystery and the Miracle and the everlasting Hope.

"They that wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings as eagles; they shall run and not be weary; they shall walk and not be faint."

Isa. 40:31