

Evolution Weekend Homily
St. Mark's Episcopal Church
Gordon, NE
The Rev. William J. Graham
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Last Sunday was “Evolution Weekend” and the homily I had prepared was specifically written for that. According to the founder of the Clergy Letter Project, Michael Zimmerman, the purpose of Evolution Weekend is to provide “an opportunity for congregations all over the world to set aside some time to reflect on and discuss what it means to balance a religious world view with the knowledge gained from scientific investigations.”

By the way, this originated as “Evolution Sunday” but the name was changed in order to incorporate Jews whose weekly worship is usually on Friday evenings.

I began that homily with some phrases from the second letter of Paul to the Corinthians: “The people of Israel . . . their minds were hardened . . . We refuse to practice cunning or to falsify God’s word; but by the open statement of the truth we commend ourselves to the conscience of everyone in the sight of God.”

We’ve now entered Lent and this morning’s Gospel was Luke’s version of the temptation of Jesus before he began his public ministry.

During the short Epiphany season, we heard a number of stories which pointed out for us just how special and unique is Jesus. These included the visit of the Magi, the Baptism of Jesus by John, the changing of water to wine at the wedding in Cana, Jesus reading from the Isaiah scroll in the synagogue, and his statement about a prophet not being without honor except in his home town.

This account of Jesus’ temptation by the devil also tells us something about his uniqueness even if it is not a historical account of an actual event. I’ll return to this thought near the end of my sermon. Until then, you’ll be hearing what I prepared for “Evolution Weekend”.

The statement of truth to which Paul refers had to do with the very special person of Jesus and what God had been doing through him. The hardened minds on the part of the people of Israel had to do with their inability or refusal to accept what Paul had been teaching about God and Jesus.

To Paul, Jesus was the Christ, the anointed one, the messiah long hoped for by both his ancestors and by his Jewish contemporaries. However, their truth was not Paul’s truth. Paul was promoting some rather radical ideas and the vast majority of “the people of Israel” were not ready to accept those ideas. That unwillingness to change resulted in Paul saying their minds were hardened.

Keeping an open mind and being willing to accept new ideas has never been easy for persons of strong religious convictions. People of strong faith often have hardened minds. Change has never been easy. Even more difficult is for us human being to admit that something we believed might be wrong, might not be true.

This has long been a problem both between differing religions and within religions. There have always been winners and losers. In Christianity, the beliefs of the winners are what we recite as Creeds. The Eastern and Western churches went separate ways many centuries ago when they could not agree on the nature of Christ. They split over the difference in meaning of two specific words, homo-ousious and homoi-ousious. The difference in spelling is one little Greek letter, one little iota.

Be that as it may, the conflict for this morning's discussion is that between science and religion. Here, we find a whole spectrum of opinions. Some say truth can only be found in science. Others say science fails to recognize truth found in religion. Some find science and religion to be incompatible; others find little or no conflict.

I fall into this latter group, having worked in both fields. This is my third year to participate in "Evolution Weekend", which seeks to show these two fields of study to be compatible. In the next few minutes, I hope to present some of my thoughts and share some thoughts of others, all of which will suggest that science and religion need not be in direct conflict.

Let me first say that the attaining of knowledge should not be something to be feared. We are definitely not omniscient; we all have quite a limited amount of knowledge and, hence, much to learn. Doing so is a lifelong task; simply stated, we never arrive. That's a message I've been preaching to students throughout my three and a half decades of work in the education field.

I think back to the time when I made the decision to attend Seminary. I had been active in church throughout high school and college. In the latter, I served as an acolyte at an Episcopal Church, was on an inter-faith group for Clarkson & Potsdam State, was president of Canterbury Club, and was quite active with the Intervarsity Christian Fellowship.

This last organization is an inter-denominational Evangelical group. I was probably the most liberal member of IVCF at the time. I continued to be involved with them when working at my first engineering job in the Chicago area.

One of the highlights of that experience was the opportunity to attend a conference in Urbana, IL at which I met the recently deceased Anglican evangelical, John Stott, who gave an incredible series of bible expositions on the letters to Timothy. Dr. Stott put me in touch with some Evangelicals in the Episcopal Church, but I never became a part of their group because I just wasn't comfortable with the priority they gave to the ministry of the Word as compared to the sacraments.

My involvement with Inter-Varsity brought up some questions of concern when I applied to admission to the Philadelphia Divinity School. When interviewing me, Dean Ed Harris made it very clear that PDS promoted a historical-critical approach to biblical studies. A previous student who understood the Bible quite literally had dropped out the previous year and the Dean wanted to make sure I was not likely to do the same.

He need not have worried. The intellectual curiosity which served me well in science and engineering did the same in my study of theology. I never felt these areas to be in opposition. My personal approach has always been to seek to further my understanding, regardless of the field.

I very much think that science and religion can each learn from the other. Both need to be able to discard beliefs which no longer fit the data and to come up with explanations that do.

Now, I may not take the Bible literally, but I do take it seriously. I do believe that the patriarchs and prophets were real, historical persons. I even think that some of the pre-history stories in Genesis are as scientific as was possible at the time they were first written.

I like to give the example of the waters above the firmament and the waters beneath the firmament. Everyone at the time could look up at the blue sky and knew that sometimes water would fall from it to the earth. They also knew that they were able to dig down into the earth and find water below where they dug. Thanks to the knowledge gained by science, we can now explain why those observations could be made.

Since the Bible was written, religion has had to discard a number of once held ideas, mostly due to knowledge gained by science. This includes such things as the earth being the center of all creation and heaven being “up-there” in the sky.

Science, for its part, has no monopoly on truth. It, too, needs to be ready to discard ideas. The scientific method which I’ve taught to a number of students is based upon being willing to change as new knowledge is obtained by experimentation.

In preparing to write this homily, I read several sermons on the comparison of faith and religion and found several ideas I liked. One was that the two fields take different angles of approach. The homilists gave a couple of examples. One had to do with analyzing a book from the perspective of a chemist compared to that of a literary critic. The two provide quite different kinds of information. A chemical analysis of a book might be perfectly accurate, but it does not help a reader to understand the meaning intended by the book’s author. Similarly, science does not answer questions about God.

In another sermon, science was said to look at things from the “outside”, looking at things which can be seen, weighed and measured. Faith understands things from the “inside”; it means trusting the hopes of the heart that we have a loving God.

Consider our Gospel story about Satan tempting Jesus. Science might deal with what was physically going on and conclude it was all happening within Jesus’ mind. Faith would, as Dumbledore told Harry Potter, say that doesn’t mean it isn’t real. Internal temptations are just as real as external ones.

I’d like to conclude with a prayer titled “For Knowledge of God’s Creation”. “Almighty and everlasting God, you made the universe with all its marvelous order, its atoms, worlds, and galaxies, and the infinite complexity of living creatures: Grant that, as we probe the mysteries of your creation, we may come to know you more truly, and more surely fulfill our role in your eternal purpose; in the name of Jesus Christ our Lord.” Amen.