



TRINITY EPISCOPAL CHURCH

on the Branford Green

May you find Christ, Community and Compassion within these historic walls.

A Paradox

By The Rev. Sharon Gracen

October 6, 2012

One of my favorite people from the world of literature is G.K. Chesterton, a prolific English writer who was born in 1874. During his relatively short life, he wrote nearly 80 books, several hundred poems, 200 short stories and 4000 essays. He didn't belong to any one genre as he wrote social commentary, theology, biographies of St. Francis and Thomas Aquinas, detective fiction - the Father Brown stories, as well as columns for the Daily News, his own paper, G.K.'s Weekly and entries for the Encyclopedia Britannica. He was a renowned wit and it flowed through his writing. He was known as the "prince of paradox." A *Time* magazine review of a Chesterton biography observed that "Whenever possible Chesterton made his points with popular sayings, proverbs, allegories, first carefully turning them inside out." This made him eminently quotable. Here are some good ones:

Angels fly because they take themselves lightly;

Art, like morality, consists of drawing the line somewhere;

"The word "good" has many meanings. For example, if a man were to shoot his grandmother at a range of five hundred yards, I should call him a good shot, but not necessarily a good man."

"I believe in getting into hot water; it keeps you clean."

"The Christian ideal has not been tried and found wanting; it has been found difficult and left untried."

"The true soldier fights not because he hates what is in front of him, but because he loves what is behind him."

"Fairy tales are more than true; not because they tell us that dragons exist, but because they tell us that dragons can be beaten."

You can hear Chesterton's love of the ironic and paradoxical in each one of these. Well, I think that today should be known as Paradox Sunday. A paradox, of course, is a kind of contradiction and we have a big Biblical contradiction here - Job's situation and this opening portion of the Letter to the Hebrews.

Let's start with Job - a powerful presentation of one of life's greatest mysteries, why do the innocent suffer? There is some consensus that this book was written while Israel was in exile, captivity in Babylon and it reflects sentiments of people who have lost everything. A central tenet of the Jewish religion rested on the idea of punishment and reward based on human behavior. If you obey God's laws and do what is right, then you will be rewarded. If you stray, things will not go well for you. The story of Job as we have it reflects a shift away from

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such a belief. Previously God could be understood based on the merit system. But Job encounters God who is mysterious and beyond the certainty of human knowledge. Retired Episcopal Bishop John Spong refers to Job as protest literature – a necessary part of the evolution of faith. Job stood against the prevailing wisdom, knowing that his suffering was unjust – he had not done anything to deserve all that had happened. The book of Job begins with the disturbing wager between God and Satan and does not end in a satisfactory way. But Job does get his direct confrontation with God and his life is restored, including his wealth and a brand new family.

What I am uncomfortable with is this concept of God. Even if it is told for the sake of making the point that God is so different from us that we cannot fathom the Divine mind and actions, this is not an idea God that fills me with devotion. Job's story feeds into the idea that God is capricious and somehow reaching into human affairs, creating all sorts of uncaused misery. It assumes that misery has a divine causation. This feels like God is a chess player and so you know what that makes us.

Flip to the next reading, the Letter to the Hebrews, which we will be hearing every Sunday until the last week before Advent. This letter stands alone in the New Testament, clearly not written by Paul and having none of the personal bits that we find in his work. It is written in the most elegant Greek found in the Bible with intimate knowledge of the Jewish tradition. Scholars believe that it was written to communities of already established Christians, not like the Gospels, telling the story to those who had never heard of Jesus. The Letter to the Hebrews has as an underlying premise that those who have already become followers of Christ should have developed a more mature faith. I hear in much of the letter, a level of frustration that that maturity has not yet been achieved. This letter is actually a long sermon, possibly a compilation of several, exhorting the faithful to get moving on their journey of knowledge and faith. The preacher begins reminding the people exactly who we are talking about in this Jesus - an exact imprint of God and superior to angels. And then, speaking of angels, he points out that the world is not left to the authority of angels and quotes Psalm #8. "What are human beings that you are mindful of them, or mortals, that you care for them? You have made them for a little while lower than the angels;; you have crowned them with glory and honor, subjecting all things under their feet." What he has actually done here is to mistranslate the psalm, for the original Hebrew says that we are little lower than the *elohim* - and that is the most regularly used word for God. This is how we were imagined and it is the identity that we are meant to claim. The fact that we lost track of it somewhere along the line, is why Christ came among us, to show us who we are. At this point in his commentary on Hebrews, William Barclay, quotes G.K. Chesterton; "whatever else is or is not true, this one thing is certain - man is not what he was meant to be."

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So today we sit with the paradoxical views of the human/divine relationship. On one hand, we are subject to the whims of something beyond our control and understanding and on the other, God expects us to live up the original premise and promise of our creation - capable of growing into the full stature of Christ, who is the exact imprint of God. We are all faced with this choice, which scenario do you choose for your life and journey?

I had a bit of a shock on Saturday - I was all set to pull out that wonderful reading that we did last year from Nelson Mandela's inaugural speech, only to find out that he didn't write it or even quote it. It actually comes from a book called *A Return to Love* by Marianne Williamson, a bestselling author, spiritual activist, lecturer and preacher in the Unity Church. She herself is bemused at how her words became attached to President Mandela. Now that I think about it, they do sound more like Marianne than Nelson. But for our purposes today, they get right to the point.

Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate. Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure. It is our light, not our darkness, that most frightens us. We ask ourselves, who am I to be brilliant, gorgeous, talented, fabulous? Actually, who are you not to be? You are a child of God. Your playing small doesn't serve the world. There's nothing enlightened about shrinking so that other people won't feel insecure around you. We are all meant to shine, as children do. We were born to make manifest the glory of God that is within us. It's not just in some of us; it's in everyone. And as we let our own light shine, we unconsciously give other people permission to do the same. As we're liberated from our own fear, our presence automatically liberates others.

That is why God is mindful of us - we have a potential to realize. Our job as Christians is to discover and root out all that holds us back.

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