

[send this](#)[bookmark](#)[print](#)[close](#)

The Parish Paper

OF
ST. JOHN'S CHURCH
SAVANNAH, GEORGIA

Vol.36 No.42

The Exaltation of the Holy Cross (Trinity XVII) 09/18/05

ROOTED AND GROUNDED (I)--reprinted

This article, by Fr. Ralston, is reprinted from 1998.

It is remarkable how often Jesus' greatest sayings and parables come from the ground. They are rooted in the earth, in our Lord's profound awareness of physical nature. The rhythms and power of the natural order of the world lie at the deepest level of his imagination.

This is not simply because he comes from the country, from a little town out amongst people who seldom or never saw a city. Right after the Second World War we had to live through something called the "demythologizing of the New Testament". People suggested that modern man lived in the city, and how can we relate the figure of the good shepherd to someone in an urban ghetto who has never seen a sheep, or maybe never even eaten a lamb chop? Rudolf Bultmann, the great German scholar who was the leader of this type of thinking about the New Testament, put the problem this way: "How can you preach the Gospel to people who live in an age that lights its houses with electricity?" In his view, Jesus is rural, the material components of his life are of the country; modern man is urban, the material components of his life are cosmopolitan. Jesus lived in a world of space, where reality was geography, a sense of place. Modern man lives in a world of time, where reality is money — "how much" for "how long". Do you, for example think of Tybee as twelve miles away, over Whitmarsh Island and past Fort Pulaski, down the river and across the causeway; or rather, is it twenty minutes by the Expressway, or thirty by Thunderbolt? Is it the quality of space that defines life, or is it the amount of time it takes to get through space? Has our sense of the quality of life in space, concrete and particular, been reduced to a quantity of something — that is, a certain amount of time?

If one thinks in these latter terms exclusively then much about Jesus becomes archaic, and to recover his essential Gospel we must free it from a parochial Saviour and from rural Galilee. It must be "demythologized" and translated into the terms of our time-conditioned, quantitative world. What this meant to Bultmann was an almost exclusive concentration on the crucifixion. Christianity is the Passion, and Good Friday is the essence of the Gospel: adverse judgment within the city, and public humiliation and death just outside its walls. Christmas, and Jesus' teaching and healing life, and even

Easter are strictly subordinated to the Passion. They are considered imaginative fictions, historically unreliable, and therefore unnecessary. Bultmann would have the modern world see only a man on a cross — Jesus of Nazareth crucified, the man who died: this is the Gospel. When St. Paul says to the Corinthians, “I determined to know nothing among you save Jesus Christ, and him crucified” we have found the key to releasing the Gospel from its Galilean fetters and making it relevant to modern, urban man.

Of course the question remains — who is the man on the cross? Modern man (whatever this abstraction may be held to be), no less than man two thousand years ago, wants to know. Lots of men have been nailed to lots of crosses. What is different about Jesus? Why do we think, or did anyone ever think, there was Gospel in him?

Bultmann did not live to see what we have seen. We have become acutely aware once again of the qualities and demands of the earth we inhabit. We live in a time of revival of concern with physical nature — the ground we walk on, the water we drink, and the air we breathe. We recognize some of the ways we have abused our world and we are cognizant of the inexorable punishment that has come upon and will overtake all of us who inhabit the earth in return for our abuse of our home. The “territorial imperative” is manifest not only among the African great apes but in the “turf fights” of urban gangs and power-hungry bureaucrats and managers. The cuckoo is the bird that fouls its own nest. It is disheartening to find that the human race is equally, if not more, idiotic. We are, in a word, “cuckoo”.

We have, however, slowly been recovering our knowledge of our garden; what the Bible calls the “vineyard” of God, which is our Mother Earth. Not long ago one of our younger members of the Church School reduced the debate on the teaching of evolution in the public schools to an epigram — he said: “Equal time for Adam and Eve.” I shudder to think what might be made of the first chapters of Genesis by fundamentalistic teachers speaking to those who can scarcely read and write. *Corruptio optimi pessima!* But it is absolutely certain that no story is more deeply probing of our condition than this one of our origin. We are creatures sprung from chaos and the dust of the earth, made in God’s image to live in His garden. If you know how to read such things (and they are of the order of poetry, not history), they tell the absolute truth of our condition.

Our world is in fact “the garden of God”, given us to tend and to keep. We were given stewardship within and power over it, for good or ill. The sign of our power is the ability we have to “name the creatures”, the power of using words and language—which is the “image” in us of the creative Word of God. We live and move and have our being in our world as God’s creatures and within His Providence. To the question posed in the Song of the Vineyard (Isaiah 5): “Why, when I looked that it should bring forth grapes, brought it forth wild grapes?”, we have no answer except our fall from the natural grace with which God endowed and empowered us, and the sorry history of our actual evils and sins, which have shadowed and blasted our lives as long as we have known ourselves.

The story of the first city, Babel, is a parable of our abuse of power. One thinks of some other great cities of the earth, and of the things men have built: of Palmyra, once among the centers of civilization,

now lying beneath the sands of the central Arabian desert; of Assyria, whose stone lions roar impotently on the upper edge of the fertile crescent; of Babylon, buried in the mud. Even Athens, "glorious and violet-crowned", sees its monuments dissolving in the vile, polluted rain. Venice, beautiful beyond praise, is sinking into its lagoon and New York decays apace, like the mold on a rotting orange.

Even the apparently "eternal cities" of the earth disappear. But the rhythm of seed-time and harvest, the revolution of the earth, and the stars in their courses—these abide. The "garden" remains the fixed and immutable metaphor for our world. It may be "an unweeded garden, rank and grown to seed", a vineyard spoiled and wild with sin, but it is nonetheless our place.

(to be continued)

The Rev'd William H. Ralston, Jr.

send this

bookmark

print

close

[Report Errors](#) | [Comments](#)

Copyright 2003 - 2004 St. John's Episcopal Church in Savannah, GA. All rights reserved.