ATHENS AND JERUSALEM
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Picture Paul preaching in Athens! To be sure, Paul grew up in Tarsus, a Greek city. He knew Greek and Greek culture, but the preaching of a crucified God who is raised from the dead sounded to men of reason like rank nonsense. As Paul says later to the Corinthians, the preaching of Christ crucified is to the Greeks utter foolishness.

Now it was not the case that his audience was uninterested. The Athenians and the strangers in their gates liked nothing better than to discuss new ideas, even tales about strange gods. After all, this was the Oxford and Cambridge, the Harvard and Yale and Princeton, of the ancient world, where all the good graduate schools were located — Plato’s Academy, Aristotle’s Lyceum where science flourished, the Garden of Epicurus, and the Painted Porch of the Stoics. The Stoics and Epicureans are mentioned in particular as wanting to try to understand, find the reasoning behind Paul’s new ideas.

And Paul’s preaching seemed to be as persuasive as usual. He begins on an inspired note by calling attention to the altar dedicated to the Unknown God. And he says, “What you worship but do not know I now proclaim to you.” A good topical way to begin a sermon, I should think.

Incidentally, the translation is faulty here. Paul was smart enough not to antagonize a group of intellectuals by calling them too superstitious or even very religious. He says, “I observe that in all things pertaining to religion you are uncommonly careful or scrupulous.” And he does not say, “Whom ye ignorantly worship I now proclaim.” The Greeks had a sense of power and order that transcended their popular gods. The logos, the divine reason, was such a power. But to say, as John did, and as Paul preached, that this was made flesh in Jesus Christ, and was then crucified and resurrected, was to stretch the bounds of philosophical reason too far. No rational person could believe that! No reasonable grounds could be presented for such a doctrine as that! And so although a certain few believed, it is said, Paul clearly failed in establishing a church in Athens and we read, “After these things Paul departed from Athens and came to Corinth.” Athens could not believe in the drama of redemption that came out of Jerusalem.

So began a conflict between the ideals of two cities, Athens and Jerusalem, and the intellectual and religious world of Greece and Rome seethed with the conflicts between Christianity and paganism, Christianity and philosophy, Christianity and rival religions, until finally when Christianity had been established, the civil authorities in effect ordered the leaders of the new faith to get their act together, agree on what they believed, by convening a council at Nicea, the result of which was the Nicene creed.

Beneath the struggle lay the conflict between religious faith and philosophical reason, between the promise of liberation and redemption through faith in God’s saving grace in Christ, and the dream of mastering the world through reason and understanding. Some wanted to understand faith as a kind of inferior reason or understanding — some wanted to assert faith and moral
discipline as opposed to reason. And some hoped for some kind of reconciliation between faith and reason.

It is the early theologian Tertullian who best reflects the opposition party — opposing faith to reason. It is he that asked the question, “What has Jerusalem to do with Athens?” And in his brilliant, legal mind he made a sharp distinction between faith and reason, arguing that the mystery of the Incarnation is to believe because it seemed impossible, the miracle of the Resurrection because it seemed absurd. There is a fundamental point at issue here: if the mysteries of the faith can be grasped by the understanding, what merit is there in faith? Reason may help us to understand, but faith, like love, is something different from understanding. It is a commitment, an act of will, a decisive act, and has little or nothing to do with reason. But it reaches true reality. The lover like the believer is moved by something different from reason. And the heart has its reasons, as Pascal said, that reason cannot know. And clings to its truth.

So what has Jerusalem to do with Athens? Or, for that matter, Athens to do with Jerusalem? The question is still with us. To many who are oriented toward secular knowledge, the world of religion seems foreign, incomprehensible, unnecessary. To some committed toward Biblical faith, the whole world of modern philosophy and science seems a threat. Another group, oriented toward secular learning, tries to understand religion in psychological, philosophical, sociological terms. Others try to find in the Bible justification for theories opposed to scientific views which seem to run counter to Biblical teaching — evolution, for example. And perhaps the vast majority feels caught in a world that puts on one kind of face on Sunday and a different one the rest of the week. And these groups are all reflected in the church.

The problem, of course, is that we inherit two cultures, two worlds, two cities, Jerusalem and Athens, and we do not always know how to put them together. What has Jerusalem to do with Athens? For example, Athens taught how wisdom in conduct could lead to happiness. Jerusalem’s teaching is to follow righteousness, the will of God. As a result, we don’t know whether we should be good or try to be happy. It is not immediately convincing that we become happy by being good. What has Jerusalem to do with Athens? A Greek dogma is that all men seek good. It is said the Greeks had a word for everything. But they did not have a word for sin. The New Testament word was borrowed from sports, archery — it means to miss the bull’s eye, the target. It is an error in judgment rather than an evil act of will. There seem to be two words, two cities, two schemes of salvation, one of reason and one of faith. Two truths — the light of reason and the light of faith. And we need both.

Surely the spirit of Greek science has inspired through history man’s progressive conquest of nature. Knowledge about nature’s laws has given man freedom; technology has freed him from back-breaking toil. Medical knowledge has freed man from old plagues and diseases — of course, it is to face the challenge of new disorders peculiar to modern civilization. Man through knowledge has freed himself from old terrors and superstitions — yet he must still face a new kind of atomic terror by night and the fallout which wasteth at noon-day.

Our conquest of nature is not complete; and it hasn’t helped us to conquer human nature. We are still beset by fears, doubts, divisions — alienation, loneliness, and despair because of man’s
inhumanity to man. This is why it is so hard to try to relate Jerusalem and Athens — to identify the redemptive truth of Christ with knowledge of the world of nature. It does not do the job. Jesus was not a spokesman for the new science or a public relations man pushing progressive social reforms in the light of new knowledge. Unlocking the secrets of nature reveals power, but sheer power without direction or purpose. And we still don’t know whether by unlocking the secrets of the atom we have begun a great new era of peace and plenty or prepared the way for an apocalyptic holocaust. Power without reconciling purpose is destructive — power without ideals and vision is blind. Of itself, it cannot save man. The truth of faith is needed, too.

This is what we inherit from the Bible. It is the teaching that the world is not so much a system of nature to be understood, as a history of events that are to be interpreted as the purposes of God. Man’s salvation lies not in understanding the laws of nature but in following the purposes of God by obedience to His commandments. This is the truth of Biblical faith — God is in the world, in history, redeeming man. This is the theme that develops from the Exodus through the prophets and culminates in the teaching of God in Christ reconciling the world to Himself.

There are two kinds of truth suggested by Athens and Jerusalem, a Greek one and a Biblical one — and we cannot ignore either. Their very words for truth suggest a compressed philosophy we might well examine. The Greek word for truth is that which is unhidden — the clear, the evident, that which can be seen as real being. For the Hebrew truth is that which is faithful, certain, or sure, that which can be relied upon, as God. For the Greek, truth was a matter of seeing the true order of being — a theoria. The sun was the symbol of the light of truth. For the Bible, truth is a matter of hearing the commandments of God, to discover His purposes — a hearing and faithful obedience. The still small voice within was the symbol of truth. The Greek truth is spatially oriented — the true is that which eternally is, the abiding real. For the Bible, truth is temporally oriented — the true is the revealed pattern of the purposes of God in history. The Greek mind turns to objects; the Biblical to events. The Greek view is static; the Biblical dynamic. The Greek view thinks in terms of world cycles; the Biblical view thinks in terms of progress toward the Kingdom of God.

It is the distinction between seeing and hearing that gives us the clue to the distinction between reason and faith. For the Greek, scientific truth consists in seeing an order of nature, understanding its operations, so that we may have the power of dominion. Biblical faith consists in hearing the word of God, believing in God’s presence, obeying His commandments of righteousness, and singlemindedly devoting oneself to His purposes.

It is precisely this Biblical faith or truth which corrects the one-sidedness of Greek reason. And in a general sense if we are to appreciate anything truly we must do more than see it — we must be sensitive to it, respond to it, listen to it, hear it. Buber used to say, “Speak to me so that I can really see you.” And religious truth involves that same attentive responsiveness.

Faith, then, is not a kind of seeing darkly a truth which we hope to see more clearly by a higher theoria or knowledge. Faith is hearing and responding to the word of the Lord, trusting in His purposes, being faithful to His commandments, standing firmly by His spirit of righteousness. It is precisely this kind of faith, this commitment to God’s purposes as revealed in history, that we
mean when we speak of faith in the love of Christ. Those who have faith in Christ do not have a higher knowledge — in the Greek sense.

What has Jerusalem to do with Athens? We need both Athens and Jerusalem. We need to see the rational structure of our world in the spirit of Athens, Greek Science. But we need to hear the will of God, believe in the purposes of God for our lives. This is the way to combine faith and reason. We cannot substitute a scientific study of religion for the practice of faith. Nor can we simply voice our faith without seeing how it fits into the modern structure of our world. Our church needs to represent more than good lectures on citizenship and culture. And it must do more than blindly repeat, without a prophetic preaching of its modern relevance, the propositions of the Biblical faith. The Quakers tell the story of a friend who was so filled with the spirit of faith, so sure that faith in his heart had nothing to do with his head, that in meeting he stood up and thanked God for his simple faith, his stout belief, his uncomplicated faith, his refusal to doubt, his freedom from the need to think. When in his enthusiasm he finally said, “I thank God for my ignorance”, an elder gently spoke from the facing bench, “Sit thee down, Friend. Thee has much to be thankful for.”

We need faith and reason. We need to hear and also to see. In this way the practice of religion becomes a continuing revelation. **This** is the tradition of liberal religion.

Scripture: Isaiah 40: 1-11

Acts 17:16-30