

SERMON: 2018/09/16 (17th Sunday aft. Pentecost, Yr. B - Track 1) - *Proverbs* 1:20-33; *Psalms* 19, & *Mark* 8:27-38

[Invite children to the front. Prepare three t-shirts: one much too small with 'John' written on it, one far too large with 'Elijah' written on it, and another that fits just right, with 'Messiah'. Finally, hang a notice around your neck saying, 'Jesus'.]

For a little while, recently, we were looking at John's gospel - *his memories* - about Jesus, but we're back with Mark again, and we're going to stick with him until the end of November.

And this morning we find [H/h]im visiting some 'villages' - some "suburbs" - near the city of Caesarea Philippi [Mk. 8:27], which was, at the time, growing *very* fast - there was lots of scaffolding and workmen, and piles of rubble and brick everywhere; [n.1] and big crowds of people being very busy.

And they were excited to have Jesus visiting their new, modern town: they'd heard rumours about His miracles, you see; and His exorcisms; and about how He'd fed *huge* crowds with just a little food.

And they wondered to themselves: "Who *is* this *amazing* guy?"

And they began, we hear, to "throw" guesses around like, "Maybe He is John the Baptist, (back from the dead)?" Or, "Perhaps He is Elijah, returned from Heaven?" [v.28],

And these were *pretty* good guesses!

These were *pretty* good guesses because John the Baptist *said* very similar things to Jesus [hold up the 'John' shirt against chest], such as: "*Repent!* The Kingdom of God has come near." [n.2]

But *unlike* Jesus, he couldn't do supernatural things like walk on water or control the weather.

And when he died, [sad tone] he stayed dead.

[Hold up the 'Elijah' shirt against chest.]

And Elijah, well he *was* a wonderful miracle-worker.

And often surprised people with the things that he could do the way Jesus did; [n.3] but he was an *old* man when he disappeared - and Jesus was young, like me - and he wasn't born of a virgin.

So, Jesus *must* be somebody else; somebody even *better* (than either of those two); and His friend Peter?

He *knew*, though he could scarcely believe it: [put on the 'Messiah' shirt].

But what about you?

“Who do *you* say that [Jesus is]?” [ref. V.29]

The answer isn't hard:

not when you know your Bible - it is a *big* book of evidence.

But do we believe it?

Let's pray: Father God, Jesus says, don't be 'ashamed of me and of my words', and so we pray that, with your help - the help of the Holy Spirit, you would help us to trust your Son and His Scriptures, "the Bible," amen.

[Ask children to leave.]

'Let us be blunt. ... Science and religion are diametrically opposed at their deepest philosophical levels. And, because the two worldviews make claims to the same intellectual territory - that of the origin of the universe and humankind's relationship to it - conflict is inevitable.' [n.4]

These are the words of a contributor to the *Humanist* magazine.

And though they were (first) written in the summer of 1986, they remain in stark, black, prominent text over at the website of a *multi*-million dollar organisation, [n.5] headquartered not far from the Whitehouse, [n.6] that, not long ago, sent copies of an edited "Bible" that they had prepared to every member of Congress and the President, [n.7] in which they took it upon themselves to remove *all* of the Old Testament.

They didn't begin this project from scratch, however: the core of the text that they sent was prepared by Thomas Jefferson, who, in the early 19th century, had prepared his own version of the Scriptures 'with a razor blade and a paste pot.' [n.8]

And I actually owed one of these myself.

I downloaded a poorly photocopied pdf of it in my first year at university.

And in doing so I felt so rebellious; so *radical*.

A real free-thinker, I thought.

A boundary-pusher.

It was something that I picked up along my brief journey out of the Church and into an agnosticism that "bordered" on atheism, (though I never really questioned that there was *some* kind of intelligence behind everything).

It was *fuel*, fuel that, I thought, would feed my "enlightenment;" but, looking back, I think it just added to my confusion.

I say 'confusion', because, initially, that is, I didn't stop to ask myself: how did he know what to remove?

I mean, I understood that his purpose was to make it less *incredible*, but by what

measure?

How, despite being a *brilliant* man in many areas, could he be sure - and how could I be sure that he was sure - that he'd understood *correctly* the Bible's claims? Or that what he *thought* he understood it as saying was incompatible with a scientific consensus that is *constantly* in motion? Fluid, *shifting*? [Pause.]

'[P]rofoundly' influenced by a *bizarre*, fringe English sect with which he was 'seriously engaged' - the early Unitarians,[n.9] his motivation - the president's - was to "challenge" 'traditional interpretations of the Bible and Christianity',[n.10] which he felt were a "'corruption'", and couldn't possibly be swallowed by a "modern," thoughtful gentleman such as he.[n.11]

But perhaps - *perhaps(!)* - how we've "traditionally" approached what we think are our beliefs on such matters should *themselves* be rethought - rethought by a reexamination of the text itself rather than in spite of it.

And this morning, we're confronted with these words in verse three of our Psalm; we hear that, '[i]n the deep has [H]e set a pavilion for the sun'; that 'it comes forth [from there at] the uttermost edge of the heavens and runs about to the edge of it again'.

More exactly, the translation should be: '[In the heavens]...[God] has set a *tent* for the sun', and it runs 'its course with joy'...a 'circuit'. [E. S. V.]

A tent for the sun?!

There's a "tent" for the sun in space?

What, like a teepee?

Or a yurt?

Coincidentally, Amazon's bestseller right now (under 'Outdoor Recreation') is the 'Coleman *Sundome* 4-person Tent'.

Hilarious!

Perhaps *this* is what God has pitched (up) in the sky?

On the dark side of the moon?

Or...on a meteor in the asteroid belt by Jupiter?

We hear too (in the Psalm) of the "days" *speaking* to one-another; that one 'tells its tale to another'.

And what are we to imagine here, exactly?

That each 24 hour period is a sentient thing - and a conversational one at that!

A sort of magical entity capable of speech?

Some *would* assume this.

Some of *our* peers - perhaps even us - would *assume* that the *human* authors who

scribed these words - whether with a sharpened reed into the wet mud of a clay tablet that was then left to dry and harden in the sun, or onto a strip of leather-hide with colourful vegetable inks[n.12] - *imagined* that these things were *literally* true.

And with reason:

Anthropomorphism is a ubiquitous feature of ancient mythologies.

The vikings, for example, believed that the ground (we stand on) was the body of a deceased giant, Ymir, floating in 'the midst of [a] yawning gulf'; that the seas were his blood and the clouds his brains.[n.13]

And the Egyptians thought the sky was a great goddess called Nut, who had arched herself over the earth, supporting herself with her hands and her feet placed at some vast distance beyond the horizon.[n.14]

And across her body glided the sun, carried in a boat-like sleigh.[n.15]

He began his journey in the east by emerging from her womb every morning, and travelled west, *up* to her mouth, where she then devoured him each night.[n.16]

And to our ears this all sounds so ludicrous!

So contemptible.

So *primitive*.

And we've good *evidence* to reject it.

Which is why, when we find what *appear* to be similar ideas being expressed in the Bible, we tense up; grit our teeth; and feel embarrassed.

But my question to you, is: "Are we interpreting the text *rightly*?"

- as God, its inspiration, intends us to?

Are we *supposed* to take seriously the imagery being presented to us *at "face value,"* or is it that such pictures have been borrowed by the Israelite authors *only* to serve as *metaphors*?

- Consider, wherever - *whenever* - we find creation being discussed in the Old Testament, it is in *poems*.

Genesis, Psalms...

These are *poetry*; poetry which, most probably, was written to be performed in front of live audiences.[n.17]

They were to *entertain* as well as to inform.

And they do inform.

They educate us about mysteries that otherwise would elude us; about who we really are, why we are here, and where it is all going:

a significant, *frightening* gap that "science" cannot fill.

We must be careful, therefore, to bridge it with the *real* truth of what the LORD has 'breathed'[2 Tim. 3:16] into these pages: [hold up Bible].

And that is not always clear, immediately, at first glance.

Which is why the question of *genre* is so important.

'This is an essential point to understand.'^[n.18]

The *histories* that we're offered in the Bible come elsewhere.

Thus, we mustn't jump to the conclusion that what the Psalmist - likely King David - has to say is meant as an actual claim as to how things actually are and came to be.

Yes, other traditions, as far as we can tell, seemed to *sincerely* believe all kinds of outlandish notions - about, for example, vast, subterranean caves of moaning, phantom-like souls, which heroes like the Greek Orpheus could bodily visit to rescue wives when they were bitten by (poisonous) snakes on their wedding day, ^[n.19] etcetera; but then *they* - those other traditions - had no tangible experience of the *real* God and His guidance.

Not like the Israelites.

And *certainly* not like the first Christians, who met the Creator *in the flesh*.

Let us, then, sit up and listen when he says that we aren't to be "ashamed" of His Word; and have confidence that we offer something of singular importance that others *need* to hear.

Footnotes:

1. See: Chancey, Mark Alan and Porter, Adam Lowry (December 2001), 'The Archaeology of Roman Palestine', *Near Eastern Archaeology*, Volume 64, No. 4, pp. 164-203, 181-182.
2. Compare, for example, Mt. 3:2 (John) with Mt. 4:17 (Jesus).
3. Compare, for example, *1 Kings* 17:8-16 (Elijah) with Mk. 8:1-8 (Jesus).
4. See: <https://americanhumanist.org/what-is-humanism/war-science-religion/>
5. See the drop-down graphic under 'Financials' for the 'American Humanist Association' at <http://www.give.org/charity-reviews/national/civil-rights/american-humanist-association-in-washington-dc-2465>
6. <https://www.google.com/maps/place/American+Humanist+Association/@38.9061271,-77.0439768,18.02z/data=!4m5!3m4!1s0x89b7b7c4e7edc73d:0x4e36e69245a929c5!8m2!3d38.9065304!4d-77.0426007>
7. Winston, Kimberley (11th of February, 2013), 'American Humanist Association Creates Jefferson Bible For 21st Century', *HuffPost*, available at https://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/01/14/american-humanist-association-jefferson-bible_n_2459465.html (accessed September 11, 2018).
8. *Ibid.*
9. Zastoupil, Lynn (September 2009), "'Notorious and Convicted Mutilators:'" Rammohun Roy, Thomas Jefferson, and the Bible', *Journal of World History*,

Volume 20, No. 3, pp. 399-434, 400.

10. *Ibid.*
11. 419.
12. See: Wilson, Gerald H. (2002), *Psalms: Volume 1 (The N. I. V Application Commentary)*, Grand Rapids, M. I.: Zondervan, 824.
13. Mortensen, Karl (1913), *A Handbook of Norse Mythology*, translated by A. Clinton Crowell, New York, N. Y.: Thomas Y. Crowell Company Publishers, 39.
14. Pinch, Geraldine (2002), *Egyptian Mythology: A Guide to the Gods, Goddesses and Traditions of Ancient Egypt*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 135.
15. *Ibid.*, 92.
16. 91.
17. Terrien, Samuel L. (2003), *The Psalms: Strophic Structure and Theological Commentary*, Grand Rapids, M. I. / Cambridge, U. K.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 15: 'While some of the psalmists may have been solitary geniuses, most of them seem to have been composed for singing communities. An interplay united the artist and the audience in a kind of lyrical osmosis. A community stimulates, appreciates, even inspires and sometimes censures by silence. More often, it fixes a song - profane or sacred - by repeating it, learning it by heart, and transmitting it orally to new generations. The creative artist is an individual, yet he probably needed a group of choristers to stimulate and to control his inspiration. The origin of the Psalms may have conformed in many ways to this pre literary "analphabetic" phenomenon. In any case, the Psalms were first conceived and transmitted orally.'
18. Dick, Michael B. (2008), *Reading the Old Testament: An Inductive Introduction*, Peabody, M. A.: Hendrickson Publishers, Inc., 16.
19. See: Evans, Cheryl; Millard, Anne and Matthews, Rodney (2001), *Usborne Illustrated Guide to Greek Myths and Legends*, London: Usborne, 55.