

Sunday, February 11, 2007

Epiphany 6C

Given by the Rev. M. Peter Harer

Karl Barth, one of the great Protestant theologians of the 20th century, used to say that Christians should read the Bible in one hand and the newspaper in the other. His point, I believe, was that as Christians, we should be concerned about, even involved with what happens in the world. And we should do so because God is concerned about what happens in the world.

With that advice in mind, how would we relate the Bible, and especially today's scripture readings, to two of the top news stories this week, namely, a love triangle involving, of all people, three astronauts, and the death under suspicious circumstances of a 39 year old ex-Playboy bunny? Yes, on the TV news channel that I usually watch those were the two big stories this week.

Now, did I miss something, or have the news media gone completely deaf to news that really matters? I suppose astronauts involved in a love triangle and ex-Playboy bunnies do provide a sort of salacious relief from the constant bad news out of Iraq and the Middle East. But more likely, it is evidence of the fact that even the news these days has to entertain or people won't read it or listen to it. I honestly don't know how dear old Karl Barth would react to so-called "news" like this, but I suspect he might say that it is a symptom of how our society has become obsessed with trivialities. Unfortunately, it takes something like 9/11 to shake us out of our trivial pursuits.

There can be no doubt that there is a real and genuine disconnect between the very difficult words of today's gospel lesson, and this week's most popular news stories. In the gospel, Jesus sits his disciples down in a field and proceeds to give them a primer on what it means to live one's life in the kingdom of God. He doesn't use PowerPoint or even newsprint; he doesn't need to. His words are short, pithy and to the point. You can memorize them in a matter of minutes. So, let's tune in to hear what Jesus has to say. I think we'll find it on the "Gospel Channel." Click. "Blessed are you who are poor; blessed are you who are hungry; blessed are you who weep; blessed are you who are hated by the world." But Jesus doesn't stop there. He goes on, again without PowerPoint or newsprint: "Woe to you who are rich; woe to you who have all you want now; woe to you who are filled with laughter now." Did you get all that? I think I'd rather hear what's going in the Anna Nicole Smith story.

Click. "The results of the autopsy on Anna Nicole Smith are not yet available. Nor will they know who the "real" father of her 9 month old baby is until the results of the DNA tests are available. That leaves it up in the air who get custody of Smith's baby. And it will take months, if not years, for the courts to decide who will get the 400 million dollars that Anna Nicole is supposed to have inherited from her deceased 98 year old husband." Boy, this will keep Larry King going for years.

Switch channels. “Blessed are you who are poor; woe to you who are rich. Blessed are you who are hungry; woe to you who are full; blessed are you who weep; woe to you who laugh.” Will someone please change the channel again?!! Click. It’s Larry King. He has Anna Nicole Smith’s lawyer on. I bet that lawyer is going to earn his pay.

Switch channels again.... Now what are those Episcopalians up to? They always have to be stirring something up in the news, don’t they? They seem to have a knack for being controversial these days. Oh, what’s this? The Episcopalians are making a big push in support of the Millennium Development Goals. Hmm, have you heard of those? Oh, here they’re giving a list of the Millennium Development Goals. The first of the Millennium Development goals is to eradicate extreme poverty and hunger in the world. Well, that’s interesting. By the way, how did that female astronaut make out in her court hearing? Are they going to press charges against her for attempted murder? Let’s switch channels to see if there is anything on Fox or CNBC about it. Click. No, I guess not. It’s just Tim Russert screaming at someone.

Switch channels again. “Blessed are you who are poor; for yours is the kingdom of God.” Oh, it’s that gospel channel again. Now wait, don’t switch it yet. What are they saying? “1.2 billion people live on less than \$1 a day; every day 28,000 children die from poverty; every day 800 million people go to bed

hungry.” I wonder where they come up with those statistics anyway. They’re saying some more about the Millennium Development Goals. The second goal is to achieve universal primary education for all children. They say that 115 million children are not in school—56% of them are girls and 94% of them live in developing countries. Yea, that doesn’t surprise me.

Switch channels. Man, can you believe that? The Weather Channel says that Oswego, NY got 8 feet of snow this week. Where do they put it all? No way would I want to live there. It would be kind of fun though just to see what 8 feet of snow looks like.

Switch channels. Hey, it’s the rock band U2. How about that, they’re playing U2 music in a church. Since when did they play secular rock bands in churches? Here, they’re interviewing Bono, the lead singer of U2. Doesn’t he have a last name? What kind of name is “Bono,” anyway? According to Bono, the Millennium Development Goals are the “Beatitudes of a globalized world.” Oh, so he’s something of a preacher, too. Oh my goodness; most of U2’s songs have religious based words. And here’s a picture of a little Episcopal Church in a place called Dallas, Pennsylvania. Where the heck is Dallas, Pennsylvania? Anyway, they plan to use U2 music in a service. Whatever will those Episcopalians think up next? I don’t know about you, but I’ve seen enough TV for one day. Click.

As I hope my little exercise in channel surfing shows, using the remote control is the high tech way of reading the Bible in one hand and the newspaper in the other. The Beatitudes of Jesus, which we read in Luke's gospel today, may not be especially relevant to a love triangle among astronauts, or the suspicious death of a Playboy bunny named Anna Nicole Smith, but they do have a lot to do with the poor. And whether the cable news networks deal with the poor of the world or not, the poor are always there. The push in the Episcopal Church in support of the so-called Millennium Development Goals may at first glance seem like the church going off on one more tangent, but the Beatitudes of Jesus put that notion to rest. Concern for the poor, the hungry and the world's forgotten are central to the gospel message; they are central to Jesus' message. And they are central to the kingdom of God for which we all yearn when we pray, "Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven."