

Easter Sermon 2010

I find it a strange paradox that the best theologians today seem to be scientists. At the same time, biology teachers across our nation are facing the wrath of fundamentalist parents and politicians that do not want the truth of “evolution” taught in our schools or the name of Charles Darwin spoken, a scientist whom the Church of England deemed worthy to be buried in Westminster Abbey after his death over a hundred years ago.

Are we afraid that the world is indeed not flat and that there isn't a heaven “up there” and a hell “down there.” Do we want to know how vast our universe is? Do we believe that Jesus is the Christ and baptism affirms that we indeed, as unworthy as we are, become children of God. Can we believe we are the body of Christ today and at the same time recognize that we are very close relatives of other primates living on this planet? I do? What about you?

Easter is not just a day to dress up and go to church. This morning we will all renew our baptismal vows with parents and godparents of Zoe and Genesis.

A friend and scientist who re-energized my faith is The Reverend Canon John Polkinghorne, a renowned physicist and theologian. Another is Francis Collins, also one of the world's leading scientists and head of the Human Genome Project. He works at the cutting edge of the study of DNA, the code of life. Collins has discovered scientific evidence for the common descent of all living creatures. At the same time, this former atheist believes that faith in God and faith in science are harmonious. The God in whom he and I believe, listens to prayers and cares for souls. We also believe that God also created humankind through evolutionary processes.

Collins writes about his desire to draw closer to God being blocked by his own pride and sinfulness. This atheist, now a Christian, believes that faithfulness to God requires a kind of death of self-will and desire to be in control, in order to be reborn as a new creation. He uses C.S. Lewis to describe why Christ died for us.

I have briefly paraphrased his argument, leaving out gender pronouns:

Suppose God becomes a human being and that our human nature which can suffer and die is joined with God's nature in one person—then that person could help us. God could surrender God's will, and suffer, and die because Jesus is human, and Jesus could do it perfectly because he is God. You and I can go through this process too, if God does it in us. However, God can only do it if God becomes human. Our attempts at this dying will succeed only if we share in God's dying, just as our thinking can only succeed because it is a drop out of the ocean of God's intelligence: but we cannot share God's dying unless God dies, and God cannot do this unless God dies; and God cannot die except by being human. That is the sense in which God pays our debt, and suffers for us what God need not suffer at all.

But what if Jesus is only a great spiritual teacher? C.S. Lewis, following the apostle Paul, says that it is one thing we must not say. If Jesus said the things the Gospels said that he did, he would not be a great moral teacher. He would either be a lunatic or the Devil. Either Jesus was, and is, the Son of God, or else a madman, or something worse.

Collins describes his own conversion experience while hiking in the Cascade Mountains one beautiful fall day. But he also says that each of us must do our own search for spiritual truth as Pilate did when he asks: “What is truth?” We must do our own search without dismissing the spiritual experience of others. Tolerance is a virtue, intolerance, as Collins says is a vice. The overarching theme of Scripture is love in all of its dimensions, but especially in the forgiveness and acceptance found throughout the teachings of Jesus. If you are having difficulty with your faith and believing in anything, even yourself, remember these words of Desmond Tutu that whoever you are and whatever you have done in your life, you and all of us, whether we are murderers, slanderers, torturers, abusers, or victims; we were all made by God for goodness.

This Easter, put Tutu’s new book *Made for Goodness* on your reading list along Francis Collins, *The Language of God*. Believer or not, I know they will change your perspective on Truth, and perhaps God will change your life too.