

Angels and Demons: The Search for the Good

Amos 5: 14-15: 1 Thessalonians 5: 12-15

May 10, 2009

Rev. Dr. Charles Parker

I. Introduction

As the central characters of Dan Brown's book Angels and Demons descend below St. Peter's Basilica to exhume the remains of the recently deceased Pope, the pope's assistant – the camerlengo – says to the book's heroine, Vittoria Vetra, "Change is not something we do well within Vatican City. Admitting our past faults, modernization, are things we historically eschew. His Holiness was trying to change that; reaching out to the modern world. Searching for new paths to God."

Dr. Vetra responds, "Like science?" And the camerlengo says "To be honest, science seems irrelevant." And Dan Brown writes: "'Irrelevant?' Vittoria could think of a lot of words to describe science, but in the modern world 'irrelevant' did not seem like one of them." The camerlengo goes on, "Science can heal, or science can kill. It depends on the soul of the man using the science. It is the soul that interests me."

The movie of *Angels and Demons* comes out next week, and it is a story set around the fight between science and religion. In a year in which we celebrate the 200th anniversary of the birth of Charles Darwin, that fight continues with the same shrillness that it always has; fights over teaching evolution in school, using embryonic stem cells for research, and cloning, among many others. And because the media (and all of us) love a good fight, the voices of shrillness often seem to be the only ones heard.

But I think that that fight is a false one; and for the past several weeks, we have been looking at – not the differences – but the similarities between science and religion. We began our discussion looking at the ways in which the church's misreading of Scripture has exacerbated this supposed conflict. Then we looked at the common passion for truth that motivates both the discipline of science as well as religion. Last week, we looked at the quest for beauty in both disciplines. Today, we will close by looking at the search for the good.

II. Science with Soul

There is a general perception of science that echoes the words of Dan Brown's camerlengo in the passage I just read: that science is about knowledge and not about morality. It's about facts, and not about right and wrong, and facts can be used for good purposes or bad. But a quick look at some of the world's great scientists paints a different picture.

The prevailing scientific doctrine in Charles Darwin's day regarding ethnicity was called "polygeny." It held that the different races had completely different origins, with people of light skin being naturally superior to those with dark. As a young man, Darwin began to doubt this

doctrine while studying to be a physician at the University of Edinburgh. There, he learned taxidermy from a freed black slave named John Edmonstone, and often sat with this "very pleasant and intelligent man."

Later, on the H.M.S. Beagle, Darwin saw the impact of slavery up close, and wrote in his narrative of the journey, "It makes one's blood boil, yet heart tremble, to think that we Englishmen and our American descendants, with their boastful cry of liberty, have been and are so guilty." Darwin became a lifelong and vocal opponent of slavery; and through his observations, he began undermining the theory of polygeny. His theory of evolution was, in part, meant to demonstrate the *connectedness* of all humankind. So, Darwin's work was inspired – at least in part – by a moral quest.

Francis Collins, geneticist and head of the human genome project, is also on a moral quest to improve the quality of people's lives. He writes movingly of the day that a young woman came into a colleague's office prepared to undergo a double mastectomy to avoid the breast cancer that ran in her family. Dr. Collins was able to take the research that he had underway, test the young woman, let her know that she lacked the aberrant gene that caused the disease in so many of her relatives, and she was spared the surgery.

Now obviously science and technology can be used for destructive purposes – nuclear warfare, experiments on the Tuskegee Airman. But, religion has been used to some pretty horrific ends as well. From the Inquisition to the Crusades to Jim Jones to Al Qaeda, religion has been used for evil, in just the same way that technological advances in science have.

The reality is that in both science and religion, truth carries moral imperatives. As we come to a greater understanding of the importance of biodiversity, for example, the natural moral imperative that flows from that is to care for and maintain vulnerable species of plants and animals. As the evidence for global warming mounts, we have a moral imperative to cut back on our use of fossil fuels. To see and understand pain is to have a conviction that we need to alleviate it.

The prophet Micah told the children of Israel: "He has showed you what is good, and what does the Lord require?" In other words, once we have seen what the proper action is, that knowledge lays a call on us to follow that action, to live out of that truth.

III. Living out of the Good

It often strikes me that we make ethics a more complicated discipline than it needs to be. That's not to say that there aren't plenty of complex ethical issues: there are a host of tough ethical quandaries around cloning, genetic enhancement, abortion. Tough issues, with moral weight on both sides.

But those aren't the kind of struggles that trouble most of us in our daily lives. In general, we've got a pretty clear sense what the right answer is; but carrying out that decision is hard. In 1784, when we had the first general conference of the Methodist church in America, up

at Lovely Lane church in Baltimore, the hot topic on the agenda was slavery. It was a huge debate, and – much to our shame as a church, and much to the sorrow of John Wesley – we did not take a stand against it.

Now that wasn't because there was any question of right and wrong; we didn't have to engage in any complicated moral calculus; but the ramifications were difficult. For those Methodists who were slave holders, it was hard to give up a standard of living that was built on someone else's blood and sweat. For the non-slave holders, it was hard to risk the unity of this fledgling American church. The call was clear; we just failed to follow it.

John Wesley divided our call as Christians into two parts, which he called “works of piety” and “works of mercy.” Works of piety are the things that we do to nurture our spiritual lives: Scripture reading, worship, prayer. Works of mercy are the things that we do to serve our neighbor: feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, visiting those in prison.

Now as you all know, John Wesley was an incredibly devout man, who spent hours a day in prayer and reading Scripture. But listen to these words from a sermon of Wesley's called *On Zeal*: “[The Christian] should show his zeal for works of piety; but much more fore works of mercy. ... Whenever, therefore, one interferes with the other, works of mercy are to be preferred. Even reading [Scripture], hearing [the Word], prayer, are to be omitted, or to be postponed, ‘at charity's almighty call’ – when we are called to relieve the distress of our neighbour, whether in body or soul.”

My wife, Jeannine, and I saw the new Star Trek movie last night, and in that utopian world, science has done away with poverty and hunger. Technology provides all the things we need for living, leaving only the quest for meaning. There is a delightful naiveté in that vision, but don't miss the underlying message: that science is motivated by a desire to improve the human condition, to do good.

IV. Conclusion

Conflicts are so much more interesting to us than reconciliation. Drama is always motivated by conflict, so it's easy to understand why Dan Brown would pick this centuries-old conflict between faith and science, around which to tell his story of Angels and Demons. It's a good conflict, with a rich history.

And, as I have said, there are certainly shrill voices on both sides of the debate between faith and science: misguided Christians trying to push an agenda of Creationism through a profound misreading of the Scriptures, and misguided scientists trying to make statements about God that are clearly outside the bounds of the scientific enterprise.

These are the voices that find their way into the media because we are drawn by conflict and conflict sells papers and commercial air time. But in the midst of these strident voices, we have an unmistakable call to offer a voice of reason: to be part of a Christianity that takes every

aspect of our faith with the utmost seriousness, and also embraces the gift that God has given us in science.

We celebrate a God who desires to be known, and a God who gives us a variety of avenues through which the Holy mystery is revealed. Let's celebrate those as we seek together to embrace the Good, the Beautiful, and the True.

Amen.