

ATHEISM: A CRUTCH FOR THE WEAK

Several years ago, the governor of Minnesota, Jessie “The Body” Ventura, made news by saying that as far as he was concerned, religion was merely a crutch for weak-minded people. This opinion was hardly new with Jessie: for a long time atheists have claimed that religions are just fairy tales that people choose to believe because they don’t want to face reality. Reality for the atheist is that man is an accident of nature and death is simply the end of his existence. I would suggest, however, that the exact opposite is true: atheism is a fairy tale which weak-minded people choose to believe because they don’t want to face reality. An objective examination of the evidence using the tools of science—empirical observation, logic and the calculation of mathematical probabilities—will lead an unbiased observer to the conclusion that the universe had to have been designed by an intelligent Creator.

The intricate order and complexity of nature bears witness to an intelligent designer in the same way as the intricate order and complexity of a watch bears witness to a watchmaker. Complex design doesn’t “just happen”—in nature or anywhere else. This is what Paul was saying in the *Book of Romans* when he wrote: “...*what may be known about God is plain...because God has made it plain....For since the creation of the world God’s invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made.*” (*Romans 1:19-20*). David was saying the same thing when he wrote: “*The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands. Day after day they pour forth speech; night after night they display knowledge.*” Or in another place where he wrote, “*You created my inmost being; you knit me together in my mother’s womb. I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made; your works are wonderful, I know that full well.*” (*Psalms 139:13-14*) **Creation bespeaks its Creator.**

God has given us overwhelming evidence of his existence. Atheism, therefore, is not a result of honest intellectual inquiry: it is the manifestation of the desire to cast off God’s authority so that one can be a free agent. Put simply, the atheist needs to believe that God doesn’t exist so that he can be free to sin without fear of consequences. And what a man needs to believe he can find a way to believe. It’s called rationalization.

So it is atheism and not faith that weak-minded people use as a crutch. And atheism is not only intellectually dishonest, it is also cowardly, because it takes the easy way out. Pretending that there is no God so that you can do whatever you want is like a child who fantasizes that he has no parents and can do whatever he wants. It’s narcissism pure and simple, an infantile fantasy that has no place in a grownup way of thinking. “*When I was a child, I talked like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man I put childish ways behind me.*” (*1 Corinthians 13:11*)

In contrast to this, Jesus calls us to renounce childish narcissism and put others’ needs ahead of our own—to love our neighbor rather than ourselves. And that’s not easy because while selfishness comes to us naturally, putting our neighbor first does not. That’s what makes Jesus’ call to us so drastic. He asks us to deny ourselves and yield ourselves up to Him so that He can change us into someone completely different from the person we

are—someone who puts his neighbor first. That's scary and it's the reason a lot of people turn a deaf ear to Jesus' call. As Dietrich Bonhoeffer said, there is a cost to Christian discipleship and most people would rather not pay the freight. But those who strive to do so discover a peace, a freedom and a richness of life that the rest of humanity can only dream about. This is the theme of all three lessons in today's divine service.

In the Gospel lesson for today, Jesus issues His challenge in the clearest possible terms: *"If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will save it."* (Luke 9:23-24) There it is, short and sweet. Christian living means taking up a cross, and crosses were designed for one thing: death. So Christian living, as defined by Jesus, is a process of dying and being reborn. Not just at your baptism, but every single day of your life. As Bonhoeffer said, *"When Christ calls a man he bids him come and die."* Serious Christian living involves a fight to the death, a fight between what Paul calls our "old man" and our "new man"—between flesh and spirit. It's not finishing school, where kindly instructors put the final touches on nearly perfect specimens; it's demolition and recreation. No wonder most people prefer to avoid it. Even Christians shy away from it: *"Excuse me pastor, but would you please point me to the nearest detour around the cross?"* We much prefer to have smooth sailing in this life and heaven in the next. I mean, who in their right mind would choose suffering and vilification when there is so much pleasure and admiration to have?

But Jesus' words stick in our craw. Along with other things He said, like, *"Go, sell everything you have and give to the poor and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come and follow me."* (Mark 10:21) When we come across Scriptures like these, our natural response is to think, *"Hmmm. I'll think about THAT tomorrow."* And tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow and the call goes unanswered and your cross gathers dust. Christian living, discipleship, sanctification—all different names for the same thing—is taking advantage of the opportunity God is offering you to yield yourself up to Christ—in Paul's words, to die with Him. *"Don't you know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into His death? We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may walk in newness of life?"* (Romans 6:3-4) Your old way of living is dead and your new way of living has begun.

Next we have Paul, who says, *"All you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ."* (Gal. 3:27) Now at first glance that doesn't seem too intimidating. The Gospel in that Scripture is easy enough for us to grasp: when we are baptized, Christ comes to us and covers our sins with His righteousness and holiness. That's why newly baptized children used to be clothed in a white Christening gown—to signify that the child was now wearing Jesus' righteousness to cover their sins in the sight of God. As a matter of fact, that is why pastors wear vestments or robes—to symbolically cover their sins with Christ so that they may be fit to serve at the Lord's altar. When we "wear" Christ, God sees Christ when He looks at us; our sins are hidden in Him. That's the Gospel.

But there's another side to "wearing Christ"—a side we'd rather not think about. People identify themselves by what they wear, don't they? Other people observe their clothes and draw conclusions about them. A Marine uniform means one thing. A clerical collar means something else. And we know that if we wear Christ before men as readily as we wear him before God, it will affect how other people view us, and in many cases that won't be in a positive way. We "wear Christ" before men by acknowledging our faith publically,

by testifying in our words and actions that we belong to Him, and that we trust Him to bring us to eternal life. It's called confessing Christ before men. And we know that if we do that, a lot of people are going to think things like: *"There goes that religious nut! The Jesus freak, the Bible-thumper. The prude. Mr. Holier-than thou. "How can any intelligent person believe that stuff?"* in other words, they'll think of us as fools. **And we just can't stand that, can we?** Because the truth of it is that we care more about what other people think of us than about what Christ thinks of us. We're happy to have Him as our Savior, but we hesitate to let our faith show forth publically because we fear being held in contempt. So let's not kid ourselves: we're cowards. We want the easy way out. We want discipleship without cost, cheap grace, and that's what we settle for. *"Pardon me, Pastor, but would you point me to the nearest detour around the cross?"*

Finally we come to the words of God recorded by the *Old Testament* prophet Zechariah: *"I will bring [my sheep] into the fire; I will refine them like silver and test them like gold. Then they will call on my name and I will answer them: I will say, 'They are my people' and they will say, 'The Lord is our God.'" (Zechariah 13:9)* A life lived in communion with God as a disciple of Jesus Christ will be a life that includes suffering. God tests those He loves best by allowing pain and suffering to come into their lives so that their love of the world, the flesh and the devil will fade away and only their love of Christ will remain.

When Zechariah speaks of God's people as being "refined like silver and tested like gold" he is referring to a process which is called "smelting." A smelter is where the extraneous elements in ore—dirt, stone and other minerals that are called "dross"—are burned off so that all that is left is the pure metal. I grew up in a lead-mining town that had a smelter and one day our high school chemistry class got to take a tour of it. It was a hot, dirty, stinking place, and I couldn't wait to get out of it. But at the end of the tour, we were shown the final product: the stream of molten lead than ran in a trough out of the furnace. It was beautiful, shiny, black and pure. It occurred to me at the time that the stink and heat that the smelter made was a necessary part of producing that beautiful, precious metal.

There was a kind of balance to the whole thing: you had to put up with the ugly smell to get the beautiful lead; the useless stuff had to be burned away so that the precious stuff would be all that remained. That's what Christian discipleship is all about: God is leading you through a refiner's fire to burn away all the worldly dross that clings to you—all your hopes and fears of what this world can do for you—or to you—so that what is left is beautiful and pure and priceless. Because Paul understood this, he was even able to rejoice in his sufferings. That's right—rejoice in his sufferings. As he wrote, *"...suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope. And hope does not disappoint us..." (Romans 5:3)* Paul was willing to pay any price for his faith because Christ had become more important to him than everything else put together. *"For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord." (Romans 8:38-39)*

God reserves a certain amount of suffering for those who love him. He says to Ananias about Paul: *"I will show him how much he must suffer for my Name." (Acts 9:16)* The ways of God are not the ways of man. When Jesus calls a person, he bids him come and die. That's something we have to learn as Christians, and it may seem like a bitter pill to swallow. Our mortal flesh goes screaming in protest every inch of the way. But God is

creating something beautiful, something precious and pure in you and me: He is forming in us the mind of Christ. And that makes it all worthwhile, for as Paul wrote, *“I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us.”* (Romans 8:18) Amen.

Zechariah 13:7-9

⁷“Awake, O sword, against my shepherd,
against the man who stands next to me,”
declares the LORD of hosts.

“Strike the shepherd, and the sheep will be scattered;
I will turn my hand against the little ones.

⁸In the whole land, declares the LORD,
two thirds shall be cut off and perish,
and one third shall be left alive.

⁹And I will put this third into the fire,
and refine them as one refines silver,
and test them as gold is tested.

They will call upon my name,
and I will answer them.

I will say, ‘They are my people’;
and they will say, ‘The LORD is my God.’”

Galatians 3:26-29

²⁶ for in Christ Jesus you are all sons of God, through faith. ²⁷ For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. ²⁸ There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. ²⁹ And if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to promise.

Luke 9:21-24

²¹ And he strictly charged and commanded them to tell this to no one, ²² saying, “The Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised.”

²³ And he said to all, “If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me. ²⁴ For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will save it.