



CONVOCATION ADDRESS by DR. ANTONIO ROBERTO GUALTIERI
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SALVAGING and TRAVELLING LIGHT

This is a dreadful time to be a minister. I mean dreadful in two senses. Dreadful as an awesome and humbling confrontation with a goal to which one is pulled but which seems beyond achievement as when gazing upward to a snow covered peak and knowing one wants to go there but fearful that it is too difficult to attain. Dreadful, also, in another sense of distressing and unpleasant, leaving one wishing that events could be more straightforward and more effortless.

When I sat where you now sit – 55 years ago – we faced, I believe, a more optimistic prospect. Most of us had appropriated some of the elements of the then fashionable neo-orthodoxy. We had read some Barth and Niebuhr. We were confident of our role: our task was to declare the mighty deeds of Him who called us out of darkness into his marvelous light (1 Peter 2:9b).

Works like Filson, *The New Testament Against Its Environment* and Wright *The Old Testament Against Its Environment* were our models. Boman's *Greek Thought Compared with Hebrew* proved the revelatory superiority of biblical history.

I studied subsequently with the Waldensians in Rome and sat in on some homiletics lectures. The Barthian influence was palpable. Sermons were divided into 2 main parts: The Actum of God and the Verbum of God. (It sounded more scholarly in Latin). The Actum was God's deed related in the strange new world within the Bible. The Verbum was the word God spoke here and now to the congregation as the preacher explicated God's deeds in the holy history of Israel, Jesus and the New Testament church.

What will you do as you move into your appointed pastoral charges?

Some may do the same thing. But it won't be as easy as it was in my first parishes. The conditions of faith have changed. I mean the process of secularization has altered the social and cultural ethos of our time. You may find yourself preaching to a rump, mostly elderly.

On the other hand, you may find yourself at the other extreme, engaged in a Pentecostal-type ebullient community that pushes out the walls every Sunday. But you personally may find yourself nagged by questions of credibility and authenticity. But one need not escalate to the extreme Pentecostal option – though it can be emotionally highly gratifying. I have said, only partly facetiously, that at my funeral service (were I to have one) I want some rollicking verses of “When the Roll is Called up Yonder, I'll Be There”!

There are still credible conservative or historically continuous options. After Peggy, my wife, died the preeminent philosopher Charles Taylor came up to Ottawa to

bring comfort. We sat in the gathering late afternoon-and-evening gloom for over three hours discussing life, death and faith. Abruptly he asked, “Do you expect to see Peggy again?”

I pondered my reply for quite a long time. Then I testified that all the travails and pain of this present life (I lost a son and a wife in the space of a year) can be dealt with if one possesses an eschatology that resolves the contradictions, injustices and suffering of this present life. Taylor declared that in spite of the struggles for faith, “For me, the Nicene creed says it all.” Specifically, these articles from the Apostles’ creed: “I believe in...the Communion of Saints, the Forgiveness of Sins, the Resurrection of the Body, and the life everlasting.” In this cultural world of cosmological or philosophical options brought about by the shattering of the taken-for-granted spiritual world of our earlier times, the traditional option for God and God’s ultimate triumph is still a credible choice.

Further evidence that a God-impelled world characteristic of an earlier time can still survive in the contemporary world comes from my research among Ahmadi Muslims. Muhammad Zafrullah Khan who was Judge and President of the International Court of Justice at The Hague recounts a frustrating search for a lost contact lens. At the end of his tether he prayed to God whereupon a sunbeam emerged and fell glinting upon the lens caught up in a curtain. A traditional religious mind coexisted with a modern outlook.

I leave it to you to judge how typical or widespread this kind of ideological symbiosis can be. My own opinion is that the dominating modern secular ethos makes

this less and less persuasive. Increasingly you will have to preach too those who still, for whatever reasons, have an attachment to the United Church, but whose minds are deeply shaped by the prevailing secular moods. They will be engaged in salvaging what they must from the extensive and complex deposit of the church and then travelling light in order to navigate the forbidding terrain of modernity.

What needs to be salvaged for such people? These questions are not unique to the United Church.

A couple of months ago I lectured to the Ahmadi Muslim seminarians in Toronto. There were 95 students training to be missionaries. The message I gave was that they must prepare themselves to work in this new land of immigration by coming to grips with an unfamiliar secular milieu. The opposition is not, as it was in Pakistan, a viciously hostile Sunni orthodoxy. It is a secular world that is not congenial towards the conservative Ahmadi Muslim way of life. With adjustments, the same broad message could be delivered here. Notwithstanding pockets of religious resistance, the prevailing secular ethos is one of disinterest or disbelief in the Christian proclamation. This is why I said that your vocation is difficult in a way mine wasn't in the mid-fifties and sixties.

Sources of Secularism

Taylor lays bare the intellectual currents of European history that created the conditions for the formation of an exclusive humanism that culminated in a secular age.

This ranges from the Greek philosophy (especially the Epicureans), through Christian reform movements, providential deism to the Enlightenment and beyond.

If we switch our purview to contemporary secularism, we should probably find that the dominant popular legitimating idea for a secular outlook is science and its corollary of technology.

Like Laplace – the eighteenth century (overlapping into the nineteenth) French mathematician and astronomer who declared regarding the place of God “I have no need of that hypothesis” – modern people do not turn to religion for explanation of why things are as they are. They deem science to be the best or only guide to true knowledge. Nor do they need divine beings to solve their problems. Computer simulations will tell them how the weather will turn out, and double blind clinical tests of new drugs will allay their fear of cancer. It is interesting that Taylor’s index does not contain Laplace.

Taylor’s term ‘scientific materialism’ serves to encompass several layers of meaning. “Materialism” points to the conviction that the only reality is material things, i.e. what is perceptible to the senses. The qualifier “scientific” further truncates this view by insisting that the material world is that which is amenable to scientific enquiry. Theoretically, the material world can be apprehended as suffused with aesthetic qualities that speak to deep, non-utilitarian levels of the self. But to restrict the proper understanding of materialism only to what is perceptible to the senses (and extrapolations from them) leaves us with an abstract mechanism.

Secularism among the majority today is undoubtedly reinforced by some variant of this scientific rationalism and scientific materialism. But the prevailing secular attitude probably owes as much or more to an evaporation of the experience of the sacred and a suffocating preoccupation with consumer stuff. Were I beginning my preaching ministry again I would have more to say about the importance of asceticism and (to use the Quaker phrase) the simplification of life. But regardless of the advent of the secular age, the need to live well in an intelligible world persists.

Roots of Religion in the Quest for Meaning

It is precisely the ambiguity and mixed-up-ness of human experience that generates the quest for ultimate meaning. If life were only unrelieved suffering and despair – hunger and danger, isolation and frustration, sickness and death – then the urgent need to make sense would not likely arise. Life as hell would be manifest. Nor if life were unbroken robustness, longevity, comradeship and love celebration, would the need and struggle to make sense of things, to find meaning, engage us. Paradise would be now.

It is the contradiction between life as misery and life as joy that inspires the insistent and perdurable search for meaning, that candidly acknowledges the entirety of our experience and seeks to resolve its conflicting elements in some integrated worldview that makes life intelligible and bearable. We see through a glass darkly; the real world is obscured from us. We need a prophet like unto Moses to disclose to us the lineaments of

the true world – the reality in which we live, and move and have our being. But not only disclose it to us, but to insert us into it.

This need to search for meaning can be compared to thrashing through the bush in the darkness of night seeking the path that will lead one out of the bafflement and anxiety of the lost way to the cabin in the clearing or to the shore where the boat is beached. In the woods salvation meant finding ones refuge; in our life journey the goal is to live truly and well. Meaning tells us where we need to go and how to get there.

When I mentioned the theological currents of the fifties, I made no reference to Bultman's work and I do so now. Bultman's program of demythologizing – more properly characterized as de-historicizing and existential interpretation – is probably the influence that survives most strongly into the present. It is revealing to bear in mind that Bultman collaborated with the phenomenologist van der Leeuw. But even Barth saw the need for existential interpretation as, indeed, does any preacher worth his or her salt. Without rejecting the historicity of the Virgin Birth, Barth discloses its meaning-for-life by pointing out that the incarnate salvation is not dependent on human initiatives but on grace beyond ourselves.

I have often wondered why I have not more consistently applied to Christian tradition the same interpretive methods I might use in trying to understand, say, Sri Lankan Buddhism or Ahmadi Islam in Pakistan. This would entail grasping the meaning of their teachings and rituals and communal organization. By meaning I mean 'existential' meaning – the vision of **God, humans, history and nature** that constitutes

our personal faith – makes us who we are. So let's try a highly condensed version of this procedure now.

Transcendence or Ultimacy

The preacher has to bear witness, in the first place, that Being, Reality, the lived world, when truly grasped, is characterized by mysterious depth, sublime beyondness. This means we are called to transcend our everyday, routine smallness of spirit, our fearful intuitions, our deluded perceptions, our material acquisitiveness.

Am I arguing for a purely subjective reality of transcendence? Is transcendence reduced to a feeling of expansiveness in the brain? On the contrary, we experience beyondness, depth, more, because, correctly perceived, this is the nature of the world beyond the self.

Transcendence as Gracious

In spite of our experience of life as dialectical, there is, nevertheless, a tilt towards grace. We need to perceive and experience not only the beyondness in life but also its character as grace. The principal evidence of this is the sacrificing love of the mother and father for their children. From the perspective of evolutionary biology this may be seen as the operation of natural selection – ensuring the survival of the reproductively fit. Without denying this, with a switch of lenses, this can be seen as grace built into the world.

The prevalence of Madonna and Child images in Catholic tradition should not be simply interpreted as a reflection of the repressed sexuality of a celibate clergy. It is more persuasive to see it as an intuitive recognition of the reality of gracious presence. The most powerful actualization of sacrificial love that most people will see and experience is the devoted care of the mother for her infant child whom she has carried for nine months, borne often in enormous pain, and nursed repeatedly during long and tiring days and nights.

However, because we are going for the heights and travelling light, I will not take time to fill in the outline but will leave this to you. Besides it will be filled in differently by various ones of us. But the bedrock of affirmation is constant: our everyday, instrumental experience is only partial; for human abundance we need to become aware of the gracious beyondness that lies hidden but ready to be revealed.

The Call to Transcendence

Your challenge and mission is to disclose, evoke, inspire a sense of the ‘beyond,’ the ‘more’ (William James), ‘fullness’ (Charles Taylor). It is a summons away from the flat, the narrow, the empty and depressing. It is the promise of abundant life, not without contradictions, lapses and frustrations. It is not a call to an illusory utopia. But it is the promise of a partial fulfillment that points the direction for life and proffers a worthwhile struggle.

It is possible to overwork the conviction of transcendence. We insist on inflating the power of the transcendent and ascribing all sorts of demands to accommodate our human needs. We ask of the beyond that our sick be healed, and then gratefully ascribe efficacious and benevolent capacity to the power beyond ourselves. When we are bereft that healing does not occur we fall back to the escape hatch that higher wisdom ordained suffering and death.

Alternatively, the devastation of the joy of our earthly connexions leads us to abandon altogether our confidence in transcendent reaches of life. But this withdrawal from transcendence may not be because our initial vision of transcendent reality was deluded, but, rather, because of the excessive burden we have laid upon our experience of beyondness.

Culture may encourage or repress this intrinsic sentiment. Modernity is in contradiction to this native sense of transcendence. The culture of modernity flattens reality into its utilitarian dimensions of producing and consuming, of using the world and persons for sensation and profit.

History/Time

After Peggy died, a well intentioned neighbor came down the street with a copy of Eckhart Tolle's Oprah-endorsed book *The Power of Now*. I read the first line and wanted to throw the book across the room in repudiation. It read, "I have little use for the past and rarely think about it." This is palpably bad advice.

To live in the past is to live not in the past. This is because our memory of past events creates presence here and now. This is scarcely a bizarre or puzzling claim for Christians who are accustomed to contemporizing the sacred saving activity of their once upon a time Galilean friend in the Eucharistic ritual.

The Book of Deuteronomy provides a cogent example of how the past lives in the present. The people are given instruction on how they are to remember God's deliverance and the exodus from Egypt. The celebrant recites:

"A wandering Aramean was my father; and he went down to Egypt and sojourned there..." Then follows a fascinating shift in pronouns: "The Egyptians treated *us* harshly, and afflicted *us*..." (Deut. 26:5-6).

The past lives in the present; what happened once upon a time is existentially appropriated. My mantra has become: Memory Creates Presence.

Implications of a Christian View of History (or Cosmology Entails Axiology)

Our apprehension of the real world that transcends our misguided routine perceptions has moral implications. Our obligation and our fulfillment lies in conforming our conduct to the way things really are. We may not be provided with a moral blueprint but we are supplied with a general direction in which we ought to go.

Let me give an example. At one time I was a typical liberal universalist. History, culture, nationality were extraneous to ultimate human value. What needed to be respected and prized was some non-particular essence possessed by all humans.

Rationality, for example. Then I had to deal with the question of Canadian nationalism especially as it pertains to the universities. I said, wait a minute, I have been formed by a tradition that focuses on historical events. “Born of the Virgin Mary. Suffered under Pontius Pilate. Was crucified, dead and buried. On the third day he rose again from the dead.” Note also the historical localizations in the Nativity story in Luke 2:1-2 – Caesar Augustus, Cevirinius, Governor of Syria. Also the account of the beginning of Jesus ministry – Tiberius Caesar, Pontius Pilate, Herod (Luke 3:1-2).

This outlook implies a *prima facie* disposition to regard history as important and potentially valuable. I took up the struggle for an independent Canadian society that valued where it had come from and where it aspired to go. I judged that the United Church was too unthinking when it sold Ryerson Press to McGraw-Hill.

Human Dialecticity

Our experience of weather is symbolic of the dialecticity, the paradox, the mixed-up-ness of life in general. On a bright winter morning (28 March 1991), Peggy, Mark and I skied through the sun-lit fields and the woods of the Gatineau. The experience of radiant joy was repeated the next day when Peggy and I skied to the Mill of Kintail in Pakenham and shun-piked homeward along the Carp backroads.

But the next day the weather turned on its head. The sky filled with dark clouds and the wind’s gusts ranged from 77 to 104 kms per hour.

The changeable weather was a paradigm for life: sun and cloud; glory and guck. This applies especially to our understanding of human nature.

Dialectical Morality Towards Our Fellows

A paradigm shift from a utopian morality to a dialectical view of human nature makes us gentler in accepting the shortcomings of our friends and loved ones. We are protected against judgmental perfectionism and rejection. At the same time this dialectical view rescues us from black nihilism and acquiescence to wickedness. Instead it prompts us to encourage others to strive for their highest self, struggle and growth. This dialecticity enables us to live between the times – between the perfection of creation before the fall and the restoration of perfection after the Lord comes again.

Nature

We have barely time to mention the last dimension of a comprehensive cosmovision. That is nature. This truncation may be forgiven because this is a subject widely debated nowadays. Christian faith gives a quick though general response to our query about the value of nature. The story of creation and the garden tells us that what God has made is good. The story of incarnation enables us to see how fleshly matter can be used for humane and redemptive purposes. The final consummation is pictured as a new heaven and a new earth.

True, bad theology has perverted these insights, but now is the time to reclaim the message that the environing world is not neutral stuff to be exploited for our economic and hedonistic purposes. Instead it has an intrinsic worth of its own that ought to evoke care and respect. There may be a corollary message as well. Grace cannot always override colossal sin and stupidity. The natural world carries its own principles of law and justice. We who have sown the wind are now reaping the whirlwind.

The Centrality of the Word

Do not be misled by a recent United Church Observer article that seemed to devalue the role of the sermon. In the reformed tradition, preaching is probably still the chief sacrament by which transcendent presence is intuited. Do not minimize the importance of the word. Words wisely and authentically uttered are suffused with engaging and transformative emotion. My so-called study contains a large plaque – a gift of one of my daughters – with Martin Luther King’s Washington “I Have a Dream” speech. I believe it is the most powerful, sustained verbal deliverance I have ever heard. I was moved to tears when I first heard it broadcast live, and am still transfixed when I hear television clips of it.

I suspect that one of the reasons the church is increasingly disproportionately populated by grey heads is, ironically, not only the impact of secularism, but a religious reason. A society that strives for mass education at ever higher levels will insist on being fed with red meat and not pap. Offered trivialities that do not resonate with depth and conviction and guidance, its members will simply garden or golf.

Conclusion

So I come back to where we came in. The preacher's task is to evoke an understanding of reality, a vision of what the world in which we are ordained is truly like, so that what is good and joyous can be appreciated, and what is despondent and evil can be dealt with. Life throws up the questions for us: what is ultimately real? What is the historical flow all about? What is the nature of a human being? How should we understand our natural environment? The preacher seeks to introduce his or her hearers into a state of being where these human perplexities are answered. Almost an impossible expectation. But if you don't do it, where will it be done?