

FOOL'S PARADISE

All of us wonder, from time to time, about our understanding of reality. Pilate said to Jesus, "What is truth?" Pilate was claiming that there is no such thing as truth. What is reality? "Church" is not the same thing to me that it is to many of the people I talk to. If we get to greater detail, none of us have exactly the same image of what we mean by such a word. And the word "Christian" conjures up many diverse and contradictory feelings and meanings. Some hate it, some love it. Some who are greatly troubled by parts of it nevertheless serve it well. Others who claim to love it greatly will barely lift their little finger to keep it strong, or to draw others to its mercy and power.

Many people take the commitment of faith – or, to be more specific, their commitment to the church of Jesus Christ – with a grain of salt. It is because they do not trust their own perspective. That is, they wonder if they have been duped, at least in part. They wonder if it is just something handed to them by their parents. They wonder if they are making some of it up, just to comfort themselves, or to feel part of a community they care about. We have brains enough to know that brains are powerful things, and that they construct many explanations for what is going on around us. While our own fantasies, prejudices, superstitions, and convictions may seem relatively sane and consistent to us, we have only to notice the way other people think and believe to realize fairly quickly that reality is a very nebulous and imprecise affair.

Walk into any bookstore. Go to the section on science fiction and fantasy. There you will find row after row of books, each one telling at great length an elaborate story of worlds, races, wars, and individuals who do not even exist. Hundreds of thousands of people read these stories, often getting more involved with these imaginary worlds and people than they do with the world they live in and the people all around them. If somebody in the book dies, they cry and feel devastated. But people in the real world are dying all around them, and they neither notice nor care.

It takes hundreds of authors and years of disciplined, conscientious effort to "imagine" and create these fantasy realities. It takes a whole publishing industry to keep producing and supplying these books to bookstores all over the world. And we haven't even looked at the general

fiction section yet. We haven't talked about movies or television or plays or opera or ballet. Or what about the billions upon billions of dollars our society spends every year to get balls over nets, into hoops, into holes, or back and forth on an oversized lawn? Is that reality? Is there something sane about paying a guy a million dollars to risk injury for life to move a ball seven yards up a field – without any exterior meaning or purpose whatsoever?

We have serious problems. People are starving, we are losing our forests, and in many places you can hardly drink the water or breathe the air. But we are watching the ball go back and forth, back and forth. Meanwhile, in order to do so, we are squandering enough time, energy, and money to revolutionize our world. What is reality? What is truth? What is sanity? If you are a guest here this morning, I might mention that I love to read fantasy. I try to play tennis at least three times a week. I love a good movie. And I can come up with endless rationalizations for why these and many other things are beneficial. Just because I can see that our world is nuts and has its priorities badly messed up is not to imply that I am above it all or in any way superior to it. We live here. That is part of what it means to be sinners: caught in a world alienated from God.

Back to the bookstore for a minute. Do you think the imagination and fantasy stop when you get past the fiction sections? If you think fantasy is wild, you should browse through the self-help shelves, or the section on psychology or history or physics or politics. The other day, I went to pick up a really good book on nutrition for a friend of mine. I found it, but started looking at some of the other books around it. Quickly I realized that I was back in Looney Tunes comic books. Yet doubtless all those authors were sincere. And what makes *me* think I can tell the difference anyway? Of course, only the books on religion are absolutely true and reliable – and none of them agree with any of the others. What is reality? What is truth? Whatever it is, we make it up as we go, and finding others who agree with us is a highly tenuous and temporary affair.

Have you ever heard of Immanuel Velikovsky? He was the brilliant son of a brilliant father, and he spent most of his life gathering evidence from ancient manuscripts (on the one hand) and archaeological discoveries (on the other hand), to construct an elaborate explanation of how our present physical solar system was formed by the collisions and near misses of new planets entering our sun's system. He published book

after book of plausible, interlocking evidence to support his theories. Many thousands of people, including me, believed that he must be onto something. We even wondered for a while if there was a plot by the scientific establishment to hush him up because his theories would uncover major errors in all presently accepted theories. His argument that we have inadvertently created an ancient Egyptian Dynasty that never existed, in order to explain away some problems with our chronology of ancient history, was particularly fascinating to me.

I am pretty certain that Velikovsky died in the sincere conviction that his work was monumental, groundbreaking, and essentially true, and that subsequent generations would realize that he had been right against a vast established scientific community which would not listen. But most any physicist or astronomer can assure you today, with full explanation and scientific proof, that Velikovsky was the victim of enormous amounts of information and imagination and zeal which nevertheless overlooked some fundamental laws and principles of scientific reality.

Or what do we do with stories of how Muhammad, though totally illiterate, wrote the Koran solely by means of divine guidance? Or how Joseph Smith wrote the Book of Mormon in essentially the same manner? Today such rare phenomena have become almost commonplace. And for those of us who do not have our own Spirit Guides to tell us about real truth and real reality, at least we all have friends who do have them. What then is to prevent us from concluding that Christianity is merely one of the major fantasy constructs of the human race? (Or that Buddhism is, or Judaism, or democracy, etc.) And even if this is not your final conclusion, such doubt, unfaced, keeps faith at half-mast. How else can we explain the half-hearted, half-committed devotion of the majority of those who claim to believe in Jesus Christ? Is Jesus a figure to inspire such insipid allegiance and life?

Yet such doubt is the essence of vast segments of modern life. Since there is no certain reality except what our minds make up, we can have it all: we can be conscientious, hard-working, productive employees on Monday; screw Martha or cheat Henry on Tuesday; fight for human rights and a better world order on Wednesday; be a good family man on Thursday; tie up the loose ends on Friday; and go crazy on the weekends – all without breaking any major convictions or beliefs. Is that not the way it is for a great many Americans? We take it all very seriously, but also with a grain of salt. All of it impacts us, but little of it cuts very deeply

into the way we spend our time, energy, or money. Nor does it affect our choices or our behavior very drastically, or with any great consistency.

If nothing else, living in such a world ought to give us real sympathy and appreciation for fundamentalist, literalist approaches to religion. Somewhere there *has* to be a truth that cannot be questioned, a book that holds no errors, a creed that separates the good guys from the bad guys, an organization that keeps us safe from all the chaos and turmoil and evil in the world “out there.” To hundreds of thousands of people, “Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ and be saved” means “Come in out of the chaotic, senseless world. Come in here with us where it’s safe. You don’t have to worry about it or be anxious about it anymore. Just take it straight, like The Book says, and you’ll be okay from now on.” Never make fun of that. It is powerful, and on its own level it really does save. Hundreds of thousands of people grab onto that like they would grab a life raft in a raging sea. Suddenly out of chaos, craziness, lostness, confusion, and endless pain, they come upon something solid and clear and comforting. Their lives get organized. They find clear rules that do not shift or change. Their minds settle upon solid, undoubted, unchanging truth. Never make fun of that. And please understand: If anyone suggests to them that anything in The Book can be questioned – that there might be a flaw in the creed, that somebody else might see and believe things differently – such thoughts may not be entertained. To do so would crack the shield, and all the dark, chaos, turmoil, and confusion would come crashing back in. To them, Scripture is inerrant. Anything that suggests otherwise is satanic. Evidence is not relevant, just another ruse of Satan. It doesn’t matter to what degree we humans understand it; the important thing is to believe it. To them, that is our only protection against the darkness, the craziness, the evil. Never make fun of that. For many, many people, it is their link to sanity.

So what is *your* link to sanity? Lots of you think the fundamentalists (whether Christian, Jew, Muslim, Hindu, or Republican) have stumbled into a Fool’s Paradise. But what is *your* link to sanity? You may have noticed by now that the fundamentalists aren’t stupid; people who have *no* faith really do live in chaos. The laws of the country, the frameworks of school and business and earning a living – even the fear of getting hurt or getting into trouble – provide a thin layer of order and purpose for some people, for a little while. But it is paper thin. People are back and forth, in and out, off and on to the standards set up by schools, government, and most other institutions in our culture. Many people seem to live by

whim, by the desires of the moment, by the lure of short-range advantage or opportunity. It really is chaos and darkness and pain out there, and more and more people get sucked into it the longer they live here. You may have a right to your own opinion, but if that is all you've got to live by, your life is out of control. So most of you have even more faith than you realize, and maybe you know a lot of wonderful people. You do if you come around here very much. But the world at large is not a kind or peaceful place. It really does go crazy, regularly. In my own lifetime, we have killed over seventy-five million people out of sheer pride, greed, and self-will run riot. You think that is the will of God? Millions have been tortured on purpose – as if life weren't hard enough already. Doesn't anybody know that hurting people is bad? A Fool's Paradise has its dangers, but a whole lot of the world has no Paradise at all.

We never know who will be touched next. For forty years I have been a pastor, and every time I turn around, somebody else is being hurt in one way or another. I hate it. The mountains are beautiful and the sea is glorious, but I hate it that life hurts so many people so badly. I want out and I never want to come back, and I have felt that way underneath since I was twelve years old. There *must* be a better place. And I want to see all of you in it. And because of Jesus, I truly believe that I will.

Only in very recent years have I come to believe that wanting out is not a proper or faithful stance for Christians. Our whole society, and even the church, has put far too much emphasis on how things are going in this world, and on how good or bad it may be for each of us at the moment. This world is not our home, and we really do live for a hope far beyond anything contained in this world. But it is wrong to let this world talk us out of the joy and peace of knowing God's presence, even here. The Holy God is here with us, and among us. It is good to be alive because God is with us, no matter what the circumstances. Knowing we may die at any moment is all the more reason to live for what we believe in most, and to rejoice in every bit of true life we can find, wherever we find it. The rest, as always, is in God's hands. So there is always a strange tension in our being here. On one plane, we feel sorrow, anger, defeat, and dismay at all the unnecessary chaos, evil, pain, and negation of God and life. But at the very same time, on another plane, we are aware that everything is just fine. Not only does God remain God – and not only does the Eternal Kingdom continue to draw us beyond all the negations that are possible here – but even here, God keeps bringing victory out of defeat ... life out of death ... joy out of sorrow. But bigger even than *that* is the sheer joy of

knowing God – of being with God. And that is just as possible here and now as anywhere else. So which realm we find ourselves in at the moment is no longer a great issue. All realms belong to God. That is what no fundamentalist knows.

So what is your link to sanity? Many of you have spent some years during which the Christian Faith seemed like a vague but comforting message off on the fringes of life. Sometimes you doubted it, and sometimes you appreciated it. Easter, Christmas, eternal life, being good, and helping your neighbors all seemed like a good thing. What harm could it do, in any case? So it was worth a little time, from time to time – worth a few dollars even. When friends got married or kids were born or people faced hard times, it was good to be able to go to church, or to have caring people gather around.

And Jesus? Well, He sort of came with the package. And He must have been a pretty good guy if so many people still remembered Him after all these years – kind of a Robin Hood of prayer, and probably pretty wise and kind in lots of ways. Sad that He had such a hard life. But you thought it was nice that He had become such a positive symbol of hope and faith and love. And most people were better off believing in Him, or at least believing in a better life like the one He stood for. So maybe all the details weren't perfectly clear, and some of the claims and titles and creeds were maybe a little overenthusiastic. But for the most part, it was a good thing and worth our support, at least as long as it stayed positive and reasonable.

Now, I'm not implying that any of you still feel this way today. But many of you can remember living through a period when this was not very far from the way you felt about Christianity. If that is the essence of liberal Christianity, no wonder the church is the way it is: with Christmas pageants being more important than prayer or evangelism; with attendance and tithing records being so sporadic; with more emphasis on the world's troubles than on having a right relationship with God. In any case, like me, most of you cannot be fundamentalists. You may honor the Bible for its content – for the Message it carries – but it is not a book that stands as absolute and unerring authority over you. And when you do start moving to more serious considerations of religion or the spiritual life, it is the person of Jesus, the presence of the Holy Spirit with you, and the reality of God that matter to you, and the Bible is important only because it has information about such things.

But many of us – most of us ... all of us – have come to the place where we know too much, and where too much has happened in our lives for us to go on treating Christianity or Jesus or His church like a sideshow. Familiar words and strange concepts have started coming into focus and looking very different – claiming far more than we had realized before, and calling us to dedication and devotion we had never even considered before. Jesus can no longer be understood as merely the Western World's mascot. It is all a huge hoax, a horrid lie ... or Jesus truly is the Messiah: Jesus, Lord and Christ!

But right at that very juncture in our lives, we start wondering if we are crazy. Have we been brainwashed, conditioned, hoodwinked – either by accident, or on purpose? Have we perhaps been taken in by a very big fantasy story? Is everybody pretending, like they do about Santa Claus, because they know it's "good for people" to have hope – and, you know, think about kindness and love – whether it's really true or not? Are we into some Fool's Paradise? Are we taking it all too seriously, when it's only a good story – one of the world's best fantasies?

Why would anybody get truly excited about Jesus? And would any of us trust Him enough to really organize our whole lives around Him – dedicating our time and our resources to the temporary, time-locked "church" that tries to carry His Message and His WAY in a tenuous, broken world like ours? Is it a Fool's Paradise to imagine that we have found such a truth, discovered such a Leader, stumbled onto a LIFE that has true significance and meaning and hope? Because if we have found such a Leader, then everything we have to offer or contribute to His purpose – to His Kingdom – will be asked of us. What's more, we will want to give it, and we will want to go on giving it.

If you die on a cross, there is only one way you will ever recover: Resurrection. If you give your life and your heart to Jesus, there is only one way you will ever recover: Same way. For Jesus, that was the only Way He truly cared about. The rest was okay if it came, and okay if it went. And some of us want to be like Him. God help us, more and more we want to be like Him.