

Homily August 16, 2009

I learned some interesting things in summer school at Oxford and during my travels through East Germany and Berlin. Of course I'll share several of those things with you over the next few months.

One of the things I learned comes up in our readings from the gospel of John this morning. It was the class on the debate between Scientific Atheism and Creationism. Our professor was explaining to us why it can be hard for scientists to believe that God exists.

He said that science deals with matter. Scientists deal with things of physical substance; things that are concrete; things, whether large or small, that can be weighed, measured, counted. In science, all knowledge comes from observation.

But God, he said, is not material. Human beings cannot weigh, measure, or count God. God cannot be observed. God is spirit. That means God has no physical substance. God cannot be observed—but God *can* be experienced. In faith, at least *some* knowledge comes through private experience. Private experience is spiritual.

Here's the example the professor gave: People dream. We all fall asleep and sometimes, when we sleep, we dream. Scientists *can* hook up electrodes to a person's brain. Scientists *can* measure brain activity when a person is asleep, and scientists *can* measure brain activity when a person is dreaming.

By observation, scientists can know that a sleeping person is dreaming. But scientists can *not* know what the person is dreaming *about*. Observation cannot tell the content of a sleeper's dream. The content of a dream is private. It's known only by the sleeper and only the sleeper can give that information to a scientist.

Some of what we know about God comes from the Bible. That's observation. Reading and studying the Bible is concrete—it's ink on paper and it's information about real people's experiences. Some of what we know about God comes by seeing the results of something God has done. That's observation, too. Those of us who believe in God find results of things God has done all around us: In nature; in current events; in human history; in our own everyday lives. But people who don't believe in God can look at the same facts, the same events, and find other explanations for what has happened. Observation doesn't convince people that God exists. Observation can only affirm the faith of someone who already believes.

So God gives us something else, an additional way of making Himself known to human beings. It's the private experience of hearing directly from God. Like dreams, what God discloses about Himself to each of us is private. It's just between you and God. Unless you choose to tell someone, no one else knows what God communicates to you. And, like a dream, the content of what God tells us privately cannot be proven scientifically.

Ever notice that when you try to tell someone about a dream you can't describe it as vividly as you experienced it? A dream unfolds all around you, but when you tell it, it somehow

sounds so flat. A dream can have color and texture. In the dream, everything around you is moving. You hear sounds and have conversations and even smell scent. But it's hard to fully describe a dream to someone else.

When you tell someone about a dream, the other person might believe you; or, he might not believe you. Speaking louder or faster won't convince someone else of your dream.

When you tell someone about knowledge God gives you privately, the other people might or might not believe you. Speaking louder or faster won't convince anyone of your knowledge of God.

In some ways, that's a part of what Jesus says in John, chapter 6. In some ways, that's why Pharisees had such difficulty understanding what Jesus was saying. For Pharisees, knowledge of God came by observation: Reading and repeating the Scriptures, and behaving within the boundaries of the laws of Moses.

But Jesus was adding something else. Jesus was adding private knowledge—information that came to him privately ... and directly from God.

"I am the bread of life." That's what Jesus said. In the synagogue, in the presence of Pharisees, Jesus Christ claimed to be the "bread of Life." A few minutes earlier, he had claimed to be "greater than Moses". The people who heard him were livid.

In the Pharisees' opinion, there were two great prophets: Moses and Elijah. For Pharisees, no one could ever be greater than those two men. Moses was the Law Giver, the prophet to

whom God gave the tables upon which God had written with His own finger. Moses was the one who passed those commandments directly from God to the Hebrew people. Jesus says he's greater than Moses? No way.

### **John 6:56-67**

56 [Jesus said] "Those who eat my **flesh** and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them. 57 Just as the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father, so whoever eats me will live because of me. 58 This is the bread that came down from heaven, not like that which your ancestors ate, and they died. But the one who eats this bread will live forever." 59 He said these things while he was teaching in the synagogue at Capernaum.

(John 6:51) The same word which in Hebrew means "bread," in the Syriac and Arabic languages can also mean "flesh." Physical bread, *mana* from God, kept the Hebrew people alive while they were in the wilderness with Moses.

*Mana* was temporary. The Hebrews tried to save it, but within a day it spoiled. So every morning God gave them fresh *mana*—enough to keep them physically alive for one day.

Remember the Lord's Prayer: "Give us each day our daily bread." That's what God did for Israel—each day, God provided the bread necessary to keep the people physically alive.

But physical life is temporary. Sooner or later, physical life ends. Sooner or later, everyone who left Egypt, including Moses, died.

Jesus says: Hey, that was really something, eh? God sent bread from heaven to keep our ancestors alive while they were in the desert! But guess what—God sent me down from heaven to keep people alive forever. That *mana* God sent was a clue, an object lesson, a hint about what God would do to preserve life. That *mana* was a giant arrow pointing directly to *me*! You eat a *mana* sammich, you're good to go for a day. But you eat a Jesus sammich and you're good to go *forever*.

When he said that, people were mad. Why?

People were mad when they heard Jesus say he was the bread of God come down from heaven to nourish human beings forever because they knew him. He said that in the city of Capernaum. Jesus had lived in Capernaum for several years. Peter and Andrew lived in Capernaum. So did James and John. Jesus had lived with Peter, in Peter's house. Peter, Andrew, James and John had been students of Jesus, the Teacher or Rabbi, for some time before Jesus began his public ministry.

People in Capernaum had heard Jesus speak in the synagogues before his was dunked by John the Baptist and before he was tempted in the wilderness. People in Capernaum knew Jesus. They had the same problem believing him as the people in

Nazareth had. The problem was experience. They knew the man.

**Matthew 13:54-58** *54 He came to his hometown [Nazareth] and began to teach the people in their synagogue, so that they were astounded and said, "Where did this man get this wisdom and these deeds of power? 55 Is not this the carpenter's son? Is not his mother called Mary? And are not his brothers James and Joseph and Simon and Judas? 56 And are not all his sisters with us? Where then did this man get all this?" 57 And they took offense at him.*

*But Jesus said to them, "Prophets are not without honor except in their own country and in their own house." 58 And he did not do many deeds of power there, because of their unbelief.*

Like the people in Nazareth, people in Capernaum knew Jesus, the rabbi. Because they knew him, it was really difficult for them to believe that he was *more* than a rabbi. Sure, he was a great guy, a wonderful teacher, someone everyone liked. But for him to claim he was come down from heaven to sustain human beings through eternity was a pretty big pill to swallow.

**John 6:60-67**

60 When many of his disciples heard it, they said, "This teaching is difficult; who can accept it?"

61 But Jesus, being aware that his disciples were complaining about it, said to them, "Does this offend you? 62 Then what if you were to see the Son of Man ascending to where he was before? 63 It is the spirit that gives life; the

flesh is useless. The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life. 64 But among you there are some who do not believe." For Jesus knew from the first who were the ones that did not believe, and who was the one that would betray him. 65 And he said, "For this reason I have told you that no one can come to me unless it is granted by the Father."

66 Because of this many of his disciples turned back and no longer went about with him. 67 So Jesus asked the twelve, "Do you also wish to go away?"

Some people believe and some people don't. Two people can point to the same experience and come to two different conclusions. The person of faith can see and hear something in nature or history or daily life and be convinced that it's the result of something God has done. The person without faith can see and hear the same thing and conclude that it is the result of coincidence or fantasy or even insanity. Experience itself cannot prove faith to someone who doesn't already have it.

Faith cannot be observed. Faith cannot be observed because it is spiritual. Faith is the private experience of God disclosing Himself to an individual human being. Dreamers dream. People of faith believe.

Faith and private experience are difficult ideas for atheistic scientists to grasp. What makes scientists good at what they do is their drive toward objective thinking. Scientists look for patterns in things that already exist. Physicist Stephen

Hawkins can trace the cosmos to one-nineteenth of a second after the Big Bang. He can talk about the cosmos exploding out from a black hole. But he gets a bit stuck imagining where the black hole came from.

Some scientists are devout Christians. Some scientists are not.

Science is based on observation. Scientists have the idea that anything that can be observed can be duplicated. Science can observe sleep, and science can cause sleep. Science can observe the state of dreaming and science can stimulate the human brain to actually dream about specific things.

But science cannot observe a dream that is not scientifically caused. That ordinary dream is a private experience. The content of your dream can only be known by you.

Science cannot observe faith. Ordinary faith in God is a private experience. It results from a private communication known only by you and God. Faith is spiritual. It comes from God, Who is Spirit. Some people have it, and some people don't. It's not likely that a person of faith will be able to argue a person without faith into it. That's because faith doesn't begin in the brain. Faith begins in the heart.

Dream your own dreams. Enjoy them.

Keep your own faith. Enjoy it.

Like a dream, faith is your own, private experience.

**AMEN.**

