

# Celtic Christianity: Healing Our Double-Minded World

Psalm 148, Romans 8: 18-25; & James 1: 2-8

*Twenty-second Sunday in Ordinary Time/ 28<sup>th</sup> August 2005*

James' epistle warns his community about the dangers of "double-mindedness," extolling the virtue of faith, cautioning them to "never doubt." The doubter is what he calls "double-minded," a dreadful condition, it seems, of instability that hinders any hope of receiving any wisdom from the Lord. It is easy, when reading this text, to hear faith lifted up and praised, while doubt is disparaged. Faith is good; doubt is bad. Did you grow up believing this? Do you still believe this way? In our either/or world quick to make moral judgments, we might be quick to favor faith and worry should we harbor a doubting thought or two. I have met many people who have given up on Christianity or at least active participation in the church because they think that absolute, unwavering faith in every creed is required all the time and because they doubt and take their doubts seriously, somehow feel judged or inadequate Christians and so stay away.

Although James warns about double-mindedness, I think he unintentionally creates a false dichotomy between faith and doubt, which thus helps add to the confusions of our already confusing lives. It's not really James' fault, but the way we translate the Greek and the way we hear it. The literal reading of "double-minded" means to have a split-psyche, it is to live with two minds, and it means to be pulled into two different directions with conflicting allegiances. Now, if this sounds painful, it is, and in the end becomes untenable because it cannot be sustained for long without extremely destructive consequences. What James is talking about here is *single-mindedness* – *single-minded devotion to the God who seeks abundantly and generously to provide for us*. That's what he's after, I believe, a way of life that is single-mindedly devoted to God, a devotion or focus that then shapes the way we live and view the world. James is warning about those things that might divert attention from our devotion to God and thus divert us from God's vision for the world. Unfortunately, with our moralistic understanding of scripture, we tend to distort the text and end up somehow thinking we're going to be judged for doubting. Jesus didn't have a problem with doubt (John 20: 19-29); neither should we. In fact, I believe, that faith and doubt are not opposites, but part of the same. Doubt is healthy and keeps us honest.<sup>1</sup>

My focus today is not faith and doubt, *per se*, but what I believe are dangerous *either/or* divisions plaguing our world today that bifurcate reality, distort truth, and hinder our ability to have that kind of single-mindedness James advocates. If we're awake, we know that we are living in a time of deep division. Shi'a and Sunni and Kurds in Iraq can't seem to get along; neither can the Palestinians and the Israelis, and New York Yankees and their fans remain suspect to a Baltimore O's fan (just go downtown when the Yankees are in town). These are, to varying degrees, tangible.

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<sup>1</sup> One of my religion professors at Rutgers College, Dr. Hiroshi Obayahi, said, "We should always be healthy agnostics."

However, there are other divisions that might appear abstract, far removed from our daily lives. But these are the ones that worry me. We live in a world of deep divisions, where we split up reality into categories or philosophies, groups or attitudes. The lines separating liberals from conservatives are becoming wider every day (just look at the events this past weekend in Crawford, Texas); and the vitriol thrown across these lines – by both sides – is an abomination, especially when these groups add the word “Christian” to their conservative or liberal labels. But go deeper, there are ancient divisions that still resonate in our time and shape these conservative/liberal viewpoints. Such as the spirituality vs. materialism divide, which is part of the old debate whether spirit is better than matter, an argument that goes back thousands of years to the Greeks. The Greeks believed that the world, subject to decay, was bad. Matter was seen as fallen because it was temporal and anything temporal was inferior to that which is eternal, like the spirit. Connected with this is the division between spirit vs. body, or soul vs. body. Is the spirit better than the body? Does the body matter? Is one better than the other? Be careful how you answer this question.

These divisions shape the split we often make between heaven and earth. Is one better than the other? What about the human and divine distinction? Is one better than the other? Can they be found in the same person? This is what the early church wrestled with concerning the identity of Jesus – is it possible to be fully human and divine at the same time? Be careful how you answer, because if it is better to be divine than human, then why did God want to become a human at all? Are transcendent things (transcendence) always better than ordinary, common things (immanence)? Can they be held together? Is God “up there” and “Wholly Other” or can God be “down here” or “in here” in our hearts? How we answer tends to divide up the world between the sacred and the secular or the holy and the profane.

We also set up sharp dividing walls between faith and reason, which has led to a prickly relationship between science and religion. The rancorous debate going on in this country today over evolution and intelligent design is a case in point. The discussion often assumes that all either scientists are atheists (maybe agnostics) or that if one recognizes the truthfulness of evolutionary theory one cannot be Christian. These are false alternatives and absurd. You might have seen the wonderful series in *The New York Times* over the last week on this battle. “Some scientists say simply that science and religion are two separate realms.” The late evolutionary biologist Stephen Jay Gould argued in his book, *Rocks of Ages*, for “nonoverlapping magisterial.”<sup>2</sup> In Dr. Gould’s view, science speaks with authority in the realm of “what the universe is made of (fact) and why does it work this way (theory)” and religion holds sway over “questions of ultimate meaning and moral value.” But do you see what Gould is doing? He’s dividing up truth – the truth of science and the apparent pseudo-truth of religion. But this a false dichotomy. Science is also – must—be concerned with moral value. Gould’s response is symptomatic of a deeper problem. Why do we have to choose sides? Why is everything reduced to either/or? Where is there room for both/and?

And there is that wall separating church and state that we wrestle with in this country, which is problematic for Christians – whether liberal or conservative – because whether we want to admit it or not, faith is not private, but public and God is political. Politics is really not about

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<sup>2</sup> Stephen Jay Gould, *Rocks of Ages* (Ballantine, 1999). “Scientists Speak Up on Mix of Science and Religion,” *The New York Times*, 23 August 2005.

power, but about the *polis*, that is, the city where people live. God is political because God is concerned whether or not people live securely and with justice. You won't find a separation of church and state in scripture. Now, I'm not advocating that we as Christians need to fight for the eradication of this wall and establish a theocracy, which is what people like Pat Robertson and Jerry Falwell and James Dobson are trying to do. We need to be worried when humans try to form theocracies that speak for God, especially when they are people like Pat Robertson who – obviously ignoring his own desire to put the Ten Commandments at the moral center of our common life, obviously ignoring that very important commandment, “Thou shall not kill,” – go around making outlandish and outrageous statements, like calling for the assassination of heads of state, as he did this week. This was reprehensible and completely irresponsible. It's scary to see the obvious split in own psyche clear as day, which he can't seem to see. *This* is the kind of double-mindedness that should trouble us.

How did we get this way? How did we become so fragmented? The spirit/matter dualism has plagued philosophy, theology, and science since the time of Plato and has adversely infected Christian thought since the time of Augustine (354-430) in the Fourth Century. Now, what difference does this spirit/matter split make? What difference does this make on a Wednesday afternoon, say, at the ocean? Let's bring this down to earth. Let's make this very practical, with two words: *global warming*. If matter is dispirited (that is, if it loses its sacredness), as it did during the Enlightenment (seventeenth and eighteenth centuries), then matter can be used, dissected, conformed, subdued, even destroyed for our own use to advance the human *spirit*. The ecological crisis is an abuse of the physical; this heavenly body we call home, some believe, is expendable. Christians more concerned with the spiritual and obsessions with the afterlife have actually contributed to the problem and still are today.

The Enlightenment of the seventeenth century was both a blessing and curse. It paved the way for remarkable advances in science and technology, as well as the emergence of democracy, but with a price. In order to understand their world, Enlightenment thinkers sought to order their world, created *encyclopedias* to gather all knowledge in place. In order to know more, it was assumed, everything in creation needed to be divided or conquered, dissected and examined – plants, animals, humans, the earth, ideas, and even God. It was a process of wearing down, breaking down, tearing apart, compartmentalizing knowledge, categorizing reality. Most of this was going on in universities throughout Europe. But universities slowly became *multiversities* (which is what they are today), with departments and disciplines each doing their own thing. Try doing interdisciplinary research and see what kind of resistance you receive. The old medieval university sought the unity of all knowledge, which was grounded in theology as queen of the sciences. That vision of the whole, of a universal pursuit of truth has been tragically hindered by our need to compartmentalize the world. Our world thus became more and more fragmented.<sup>3</sup> Now that we've broken Humpty Dumpty, we can't quite put him back together again.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> See Colin Gunton, *The One, The Three, and the Many: God, Creation, and the Culture of Modernity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993) & Stephen Toulmin, *Cosmopolis: The Hidden Agenda of Modernity* (Old Tappan, NJ: Free Press, 1989).

<sup>4</sup> Actually, Humpty Dumpty was a powerful cannon during the English Civil War (1642-49). It was mounted on top of the St Mary's at the Wall Church in Colchester defending the city against siege in the summer of 1648.

*So that Paul's statement that not only our hearts, but our bodies groan along with the entire creation seeking redemption takes on more profound meaning, doesn't it?* This fragmented, fragmenting world needs to be healed, *saved* – salvation, means healing. Salvation is not only the process of a soul that is redeemed, but body and soul *together*. The biblical view of reality is holistic and when we listen to it carefully we find it challenging us to think and act holistically – for the healing of the nations, the healing of the planet, the healing of our bodies, the healing of our minds.

We need more holistic thinking and the vision of the Celtic Christians of the 4<sup>th</sup>-10<sup>th</sup> centuries can help us tremendously. It is not that the Celts created holistic thinking; instead, it was their own pre-Christian view of the world which made it was easy for them to embrace this important aspect of both Judaism and Christianity. A holistic vision was preserved in their theology and practice and passed on to us. They have a lot to teach us. In fact, I think this is one of the most important gifts they can bestow upon us today.

These divisions that plague our world and our church would seem quite alien, strange, and odd to Celtic Christians. As I tried to show last week, the Celts embraced the incarnation, of God in the flesh, and had no problem believing this to be true. The incarnation itself affirms both the humanity and the divinity of Jesus at the same time, with no diminishment of either characteristic, which gives a clue about the nature of reality. The early understanding of Jesus holds both together; it is holistic, calling for an incarnational understanding of Christianity. It is by nature holistic and challenges us to embrace a holistic way of thinking and conceptualizing the world. I go back to Psalm 24:1, “The earth and all it contains belongs to the Lord.” Truth is one. *Unity is not uniformity, but diversity that makes space for apparent opposites.*

Someone once asked George Macleod (1895-1991), the founder of the Iona Community, advocate of a Celtic vision, what he thought was the matter with Christianity (this was back in the 1950s). He said, “Do you know what’s the matter with Christianity? What’s the matter with Christianity is matter. Matter is the matter.”<sup>5</sup> I’ve always loved this answer and personally couldn’t agree more. “For decades,” he wrote, “the Church has gone up the spiritual road, and science has taken over ‘the world that matters.’”<sup>6</sup> This is one of the reasons why I have problems with the word “spirituality” because it’s not biblical and it takes us away from the truth of the gospel that has to do with flesh and blood, where and how people live in this world, spirit is not elevated above matter in scripture. “I just cannot find it in the Bible,” Macleod writes, “What I find in the Bible – what differentiates our faith from all other world religions – is precisely that God is to be found in the material. And that God came to redeem man, soul and body. The Gospel claims the key to all material issues is to be found in the mystery that Christ came in a body and healed bodies and fed bodies, and that he died in a body, and rose in a body: to save man and body.”<sup>7</sup> It is why Macleod urged us to change the verse in our opening hymn; instead of “Angels help us to adore him,” we should sing, “Atoms help us to adore him.”

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<sup>5</sup> See Ron Ferguson’s biography, *George Macleod* (1990).

<sup>6</sup> “Mobilization for Survival,” *Daily Readings with George Macleod* (London: Fount, 1991), p. 67.

<sup>7</sup> From the sermon, “The Church in the Modern World,” 1948, in *Daily Readings*, p. 62. Cf. the quotation in the bulletin, also from Macleod, “...the very genius of the Hebrew tradition is its relatedness with all life. In the words of John Macmurray [1891-1976], ‘The great contribution of the Hebrews to religion is that they did away with it.’”

[This is also why the contemporary Irish theologian, Noel Dermot O'Donoghue, could write as a Celt urging us to develop a *theology of the secular*. There is no subject, no arena, no aspect of life that is beyond the realm of Christian concern and endeavor – the artist, the scientist, the poet, the writer, the businesswoman, teacher, accountant, CEO. I think of James Clerk Maxwell (1831-1879), the nineteenth century physicist working in his laboratory at Cambridge University, an evangelical Christian, single-minded in his devotion to God which shaped his life-work to grasp the complexities of this universe; he was the one Einstein (1879-1955) credited as being most influential in his own discoveries. Look what Maxwell accomplished living from a holistic perspective.]<sup>8</sup>

The early Celtic Christians didn't divide up the world between secular and sacred, holy or profane, religious and non-religious. As was true in scripture, *the most profane place can become the place of encounter with the holy. The most profane place – like a cross in a garbage dump outside the city walls – can become the place of encounter with the holy.* The mundane can be shot through with glory. These are healing words. The world belongs to the Lord and there's no telling where we might encounter God's presence. What we're called to do is search after God with single-minded devotion and commitment, to encounter and discover in many ways and places a God who gives *abundantly* and *generously* more than we could ever imagine.

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All previous religions had been concerned with the soul and its journey through a negative material order. The Hebrew faith was the first to be concerned with the whole, with redemption of the material, with the recreation of the whole person." From an Advent talk, 1958, included in *Daily Readings*, p. 63.

<sup>8</sup> Portions of this section of the sermon were omitted during the service in the interest of time. Noel Dermot O'Donoghue, *Heaven in Ordinarie: Some Radical Considerations* (Springfield, IL Templegate, 1979), p. 179ff.