Dec. 27, 2010

A blizzard here in the Northeast… It's the Feast of St. John, the Evangelist…

Once, long before he became an exile on Patmos stormed by apocalyptical visions, John sat in a storm-tossed boat on the Sea of Galilee. That boat, represented here by a 17th century painting (Ludolf Bakhuysen), will serve as the masthead of this blog. According to the story, Jesus is sleeping on a cushion in the stern when a terrific storm blows up over the lake, threatening to sink the boat and drown those aboard. The disciples, overwhelmed by what looks to be impending doom, cry out to Jesus who seems disturbed only by the fact that he's been unnecessarily roused from his slumbers. From his perspective, there's nothing to be afraid of; he gives the command and the storm ends.

This blog is not written from Jesus' perspective, however, but from that of the others there with him. Jesus was a good teacher and did not pressure his disciples into stifling what they had to say; with the waves crashing in and the boat sinking as they shook Jesus awake, my guess is that their speech at that moment was pretty much uncensored. The rough drafts that will appear here from time to time will also be uncensored, sometimes not entirely prudent or perhaps even regrettable. Maybe the writer here shouldn't write…and maybe you shouldn't read…

But the weathervane outside my window is whipping every which way, the wild turkeys down below are slogging aimless and nervous through the snow, and the wind is howling so loud it doesn't seem to make any difference at all what gets shouted into it! So here goes.

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One thing about a blizzard like this is that it can bring everything to a halt. We like that…though not for very long. We want things to start right up again. The novelty of stillness when the power is down, of the silence that returns, wears off quick and we want to get going again. In this we are not like those fishermen in the boat. They lived close to nature, knew how to tame it, "subdue" it as Genesis says, working with it, and never for a moment forgetting their limits. They respected those limits; silence and stillness were not novelties; the fishermen were familiar with

the authority of the God who made all things and set to them their rhythm, pace and good time. If a storm came up for them, they didn't experience relief. They only felt acutely their mortal limits, struggled with all their might, and hoped to God they'd somehow be brought through.

But we determined, some time ago, to make ourselves the controllers of nature, to do with it as we chose, without limit. And we've succeeded in that effort to a remarkable degree, so while the wind howls and the snow blows and the turkeys fret, I have a cup of warm coffee and sit comfortable in a heated room. If the power goes out, it will be back, probably before the house has a chance to cool down...

There are systems--huge, complex, secure, redundant--tankers from the Mideast, high-tension lines from James Bay, instantaneous global communications everywhere, governmental agencies here at home for every need and purpose… No point in cataloguing these things; they go on forever, pervading everything, all to keep me and the rest of us in our great unsinkable Titanic so safe and secure that we can enjoy even a howling blizzard, no real threat to us at all, as a sort of distraction, a relief from the routine of security and comfort…which perhaps is a little confining, after all…

The trucks are out there now, plowing. You hear the beepers required by federal mandate every time they go into reverse, like the beepers to remind me that my coffee is now heated, or like the beepers that will stir some nurse to attention when my heart stops in the ICU, and I've been reduced to the status of a biological node lost somewhere in a web of medical wires, tubes, gauges, pumps and drains.

If the men in Jesus' boat had the art of taming nature within the given limits, sailing across the sea when the winds permitted, catching fish when the fish had gathered, we have the art of unlimited systems, all of nature stretched out on a mathematical grid, pinned down, at our disposal, ready or not. We can't yet command the storm to cease but technological and social systems, designed in the light of mathematical scientific theory, give such order to nature that we are secure in the storm. Ideas, our own ideas, rule.

We're not so much unlike the Egyptians. They had math, too, and used it to learn the eternal order of the heavens to imitate that order themselves, drawing up their calendars, laying out their cities and heaping up their tombs all in alignment with the stars, imposing absolute order on everything, making themselves, their bodies, their whole social order rigid with the eternity of their ideas, like the eternity of insects in amber. They were as enclosed by their ideas, their idols

and their gods as a mummy in its case.

The story of Jesus in the boat begins with Moses commanding Pharaoh, “Let my people go!” ou
t
from Egypt. “Go
out
from her, o my People!” So says the angel in the Book of Revelation.

After having thus successively taken each member of the community in its powerful grasp, and fashioned them at will, the supreme power then extends its arm over the whole community. It covers the surface of society with a net-work of small complicated rules, minute and uniform, through which the most original minds and the most energetic characters cannot penetrate, to rise above the crowd. The will of man is not shattered, but softened, bent, and guided: men are seldom forced by it to act, but they are constantly restrained from acting: such a power does not destroy, but it prevents existence; it does not tyrannize, but it compresses, enervates, extinguishes, and stupefies a people, till each nation is reduced to be nothing better than a flock of timid and industrious animals, of which the government is the shepherd.

This isn’t a description of Egypt, of course, but of what was then a future possible United States, as imagined or foreseen by Alexis de Tocqueville after his visit here back in the 1830’s. It’s his picture of what the new democratic system of government might become if America’s citizens weren’t careful. I think of it every time I get into the security check at an airport. If you want to fly, that is, if you mean to insert yourself into the great complex of delicate technologies and explosive forces required for a four hour transit of a continent or sea, you’d better fasten your safety belt; and if you live in a world where those who haven’t submitted themselves to the systems of the West have, many of them, submitted rather to Allah, then submit you do, powerless and dumb as sheep. Off with your belt! Off with your shoes! Off with your dignity! There is no alternative! In the face of such imperatives, we all become like the fatalist Arabs: You comply, you submit, and hope you’ll get where you meant to go in one piece, more or less on time and relatively unharassed, insha’Allah!

It’s a disposition of mind that overtakes us, automatically and unnoticed, a kind of absolute passivity. Such passivity has become a primary fact of life lived within our technological social systems clicking and beeping away in all their mathematical inevitability. They look and feel to us as unquestionable as fate or the weather. But our passivity before them is nothing less than a new form of acceptance of a very old form of worship which, from the Scriptures, given us by Moses who broke with all that, we learned to call idolatry.

The First Commandment is first because it is the most important. “I AM the LORD, your God. You shall have no other gods besides me.” We make a big mistake if we think we got over idol worship sometime long ago and that we’re done with the question. The identity of God, of who God actually is, is not so easily determined. It’s common enough these days not even to try! “Whatever you think god is, that’s what god is for you!” So people say and think they’ve done with the question. And there is some truth to what they say: What you think is god can become as if god for you. What you treat as your god or gods is as god to your life, giving order (or disorder) rule (or misrule) to your choices and actions.

But this leaves entirely unsettled who God Himself actually is. It’s in the face of this unanswered question that God says to the Israelites, “I AM the LORD, your God.” He gives the most utterly explicit possible answer to the question by saying “I.” This One, precisely, only, unambiguously, irreplaceably this One, addressing Himself to us: “Hear, o Israel, the LORD our God is One!”

He has no genealogy, as do the pagan gods, but He makes Himself particularly known to a people who, because He addresses Himself to them, do get a genealogy. To Moses He says, “I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob, your fathers.” And then He says, “’I-will-be-who-I-will-be,’ that is my name.” That is, He identifies Himself first by reference to what He has said and done in the presence of those who have gone before, explicitly those ancestors, and then He identifies Himself by reference to what He will do in the presence of their descendents who will be coming afterwards, explicitly
that
people. This is some One who makes Himself known, not just to everyone, generally, universally and impersonally, but to someone, to Abraham and his offspring, to them particularly. God is the absolute opposite to the great amorphous “Whatever” which light-minded persons invoke when they want to avoid the question concerning who God is or how they themselves or others ought actually to live their lives.

Who God actually is bears decisively on the question of how one ought actually to live. No wonder people avoid the question! The invocation of “Whatever” in the matter of God’s identity or of how one ought to live clears a vast open space for other possibilities, which is to say, for any number of pseudo-gods and idols. “Multiculturalism” and the embrace of “diversity” are more positive ways of saying “Whatever,” but they come to precisely the same thing; they are sociological expressions for the new polytheism.

And here’s the nub of the matter: In this light-minded way, being “open,” as we say, to *everythin*

g, means
the failure to examine seriously
anything
that may bear real divine power or import. The god of System, of mathematical inevitability, of the fateful and progressive unfolding of the scientific/social project, of globalizing organization, management and conformity, programming and uniformity, in short, the god of the world-shaping ideologies of the last century and beyond…
that
god goes unobserved.
That
god is not some inconsequential “Whatever.” It has had terrible power, a crushing, bestial, overwhelmingly real power, and its worship has meant the bloody sacrifice and slaughter of a hundred million lives and the fatal deception of unnumbered minds and souls. Those who so open-mindedly, “compassionately” and promiscuously accept all “differences,” all “life-styles” and all “choices,” welcoming them into their lukewarm, homogenizing embrace, fail to see that dark thing come now to embrace and swallow them!

Over all our aimless liberated forces, movements and desires, Something stands, gathering them together, working out their vector sum, shaping them like some unsouled Demiurge into…? We don’t know. Not yet. We don’t know…

By Fr. Barry Bercier