

A GLIMPSE OF DIVINITY

January 17, 2010

Text – Psalm 139: 1 - 18, 23 - 24
I Corinthians 12: 1 - 14

To our readings from scripture this morning I would like to add several others from a book entitled The Home Planet (The Association of Space Explorers, Addison-Wesley Publishing Company, 1988). It is a beautiful collection of photographs and journal entries taken and written by men and women who have had the privilege of being in space. The first reading is from James Irwin, a member of the Apollo 10 mission to the moon.

“The Earth reminded us of a Christmas tree ornament hanging in the blackness of space. As we got farther and farther away it diminished in size. Finally it shrank to the size of a marble, the most beautiful marble you can imagine. The beautiful, warm, living object looked so fragile, so delicate, that if you touched it with a finger it would crumble and fall apart. Seeing this has to change a man, has to make a man appreciate the creation of God and the love of God.”

Irwin's words are echoed by a Soviet cosmonaut, Boris Vloynov:

“During a space flight, the psyche of each astronaut is reshaped. Having seen the sun, the stars, and our planet, you become more full of life, softer. You begin to look at all the living things with greater trepidation and you begin to be more kind and patient with the people around you. At any rate (he says) that is what happened to me.”

Soviet cosmonaut and American astronaut – equally moved. Edgar Mitchell (Apollo 14 astronaut, 1971) put it this way: “My view of our planet was a glimpse of divinity.... We went to the moon as technicians,” he says; “we returned as humanitarians.”

Other quotations from the book intrigue me. “The first day or so we all pointed to our (own) countries,” a Saudi Arabian astronaut writes. “The third or fourth day we were pointing to our continents. By the fifth day we were aware of only one Earth.” (Sultan Bin Salman al-Saud) Muhammad Ahmad Faris, a Syrian, writes: “From space I saw Earth – indescribably beautiful

with the scars of national boundaries gone.” Finally, this line from Wubbo Ockels of the Netherlands stands out: “Space is so close – It took only eight minutes to get there and twenty to get back.”

Russians, Americans, Chinese, Syrians, Indians, Saudi Arabians, Mexicans, Vietnamese, Dutch: they all testify to what Edgar Mitchell calls “a glimpse of divinity.” They remind me of Paul’s simple line in our New Testament lesson this morning: “*By one Spirit were all baptized into one body – Jews or Greeks, slaves or free -- and all were made to drink of one Spirit.*” (1 Corinthians 12: 13)

“*One Spirit ... one body*” ... one planet ... one earth ... the message seems to be that to glimpse divinity is to experience a vision of one-ness. It’s a message that transcends not only nation-states, but cultures and religions. Do you remember the famous letter that Chief Seattle wrote in 1852? The United States government had inquired about buying tribal lands. He replied:

“The President in Washington sends word that he wishes to buy our land. But how can you buy or sell the sky? the land? The idea is strange to us. If we do not own the freshness of the air and the sparkle of the water, how can you buy them?

Every part of this earth is sacred to my people. Every shining pine needle, every sandy shore, every mist in the dark woods, every meadow, every humming insect. All are holy in the memory and experience of my people.... We are part of the earth and it is part of us.

This we know: the earth does not belong to man; man belongs to the earth. All things are connected like the blood that unites us all. Man did not weave the web of life, he is merely a strand in it. Whatever he does to the web, he does to himself

One thing we know: our god is also your god. The earth is precious to him and to harm the earth is to heap contempt on its creator

As we are part of the land, you too are part of the land. This earth is precious to us. It is also precious to you. One thing we know: there is only one God. No man, be he Red Man or White Man, can be apart. We are brothers after all.” [Quoted by Joseph Campbell, *The Power of Myth*, pp. 34-35]

Do these words not also convey “a glimpse of divinity?” They do to me.

T. S. Eliot captured what I’m feeling when he said:

As we grow older
The world becomes stranger, the pattern more complicated
Of dead and living. Not the intense moment
Isolated, with no before and after,
But a lifetime burning in every moment.

[“East Coker”]

I have experienced “the world becom(ing) stranger” and “the pattern more complicated” as I have grown older. Have you?

Like the Saudi Arabian astronaut whom I quoted earlier, so many of us begin our life journeys by pointing to our own country. Something within us knows that whatever it is that we are, we are somehow more than simply an isolated individual, with no before and no after. Love of country is the first to draw us out and we find our sense of self and wholeness immeasurably richer and profoundly stronger when we embrace (or are embraced by) that larger community. Something deep stirs, in spite of our worldliness and even our cynicism, when we hear our country’s anthem sung or take part – even via television – in such patriotic pageantry as a Presidential Inauguration. John F. Kennedy touched that chord in many of us when he said: “Ask not what your country can do for you; ask rather what you can do for your country.”

But then, for me anyway, this “astronaut’s pointing” to country gives way after a time to a pointing to continent – which for many of us was and still is a sense of belonging to that broader community called the Church. At first it seems limitless and universal. Race, class, nationality, cultural affinity, even chronology are transcended. “*By one Spirit we were all baptized into one body,*” Paul says, “– *Jews or Greeks, slaves or free – and all were made to drink of one Spirit.*”

Here at last I felt (and still feel) is something worthy of the “me” I experience myself to be. Here is something expressive of all the complexity and the beauty that lies within. The more we come to know of it, however, the more frequently do we find the astronaut's “scars of national boundaries” etched upon it. Dogma and doctrine, denomination and tradition ... they begin to conspire after a time (don't they?) to divide and polarize, to tear down ... not build up.

Paul certainly experienced that two thousand years ago with the Church in Corinth. His analogy of the differing parts of the body was designed to address the petty ego struggles and rampant factionalism that was and still is so prevalent within the church. In the broadest scheme of things, nations and principalities are rank amateurs when it comes to the fine art of territorial conflict and even warfare.

Those who love the Church somehow must come to terms with this. Augustine of Hippo did as good a job as any I know. He said: “The Church has many whom God does not have, and God has many whom the church does not have.”

And so many people (myself included) step back yet another step. Like it did for the astronauts orbiting our globe, the fifth day comes, and we see not simply our own countries or continents, but “only (the) one Earth.” Christian though we are (and grateful we are to be so called), we know with Chief Seattle that “there is only one God. No man, be he Red Man or White Man, can be apart. We are brothers after all.”

Does that sound strange or even “blasphemous” to you? I hope not. “*In my Father's house there are many rooms,*” Jesus said to his disciples. (John 14: 2) Not one of them was an American or a Christian. Neither was Jesus. “*God is a Spirit,*” he said another time; “*whoever would worship God must do so in spirit and in truth.*” Not in Hebrew or Greek ... not in Latin or English; not in Protestant or Catholic; not in Christian or Jewish – in spirit and in truth.

“My view of our planet (from space) was a glimpse of divinity,” Edgar Mitchell says. You don't have to go that far to see the same thing. The psalmist of old was touched in exactly the same way. “*O Lord, you have searched me and known me,*” he writes;

*You know when I sit down and when I rise up;
you discern my thoughts from far away*

Such knowledge is too wonderful for me;

it is so high I cannot attain it

I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made

Search me, O God, and know my heart ...

lead me in the way everlasting.

You can see that, my friends, on a winter evening in Northern Vermont, when the skies are clear and the stars are like diamonds driven into the vault of heaven. You can see it on a Sunday morning as well as you sit in a room like this – surrounded by brothers and sisters who, “*by one Spirit were all baptized into one body -- Jews or Greeks, slaves or free -- and all were made to drink of one Spirit.*” Let us thank God for these glimpses of divinity which are given to us, knowing they are but a foretaste of the even greater truth and the richer bounty which will one day be made known to all of us.