

5th Sunday of Easter, May 14, 2006, Liturgical Year “B”

ST. BARTHOLOMEW’S CHURCH IN THE TOWN OF TONAWANDA, NY

The Rev. Fr. Arthur W. Ward, Jr. + Rector

“Is the Bible Really God’s Word? (part 2): Debunking the Da Vinci Code”

A BLESSED MOTHER’S DAY!

Well, today is Mother’s Day and I would like to especially welcome all the mothers here with us this morning. I think it’s appropriate that we honor mothers on a specific a day of the year, and that the day we do it is on the Lord’s Day – for moms are truly a gift from God. And when I think of motherhood, I can’t help but think of the qualities that are to be found in any good mom. Qualities like self-sacrifice, service, patience, compassion, and truthfulness. But these aren’t just qualities of motherhood, these are divine qualities and they reflect God’s character and His love for us. And these qualities are lifted up in God’s Word.

A QUICK REVIEW

Yet, we live in a world which ridicules and for the most part ignores the Bible. Recall from last week how every facet of society does not treat the Bible as God’s Word. So the question, “Is the Bible really God’s Word?” is one that needs to be answered. And we can answer this question by looking at four “test” questions: What does the Bible claim? Is it relevant? Is it reliable? And what does it produce?

Last week we looked at the first two. The Bible claims over and over again that it is God’s Word, and it also makes the claim that Jesus is the Word of God made flesh. He is both God and man. And as the Son of God, He is the means of our salvation, and not for ours only, but for the whole world. It is only through Christ that God restores mankind and this is the message of both the Old and New Testaments.

And then the the second question, “Is the Bible relevant?” One only has to read it, to know the answer is, “Yes!” Only the Bible answers the most fundamental questions of life: How did we get here? Why are we here? What is purpose? What should we do? What’s our destiny? How should we live?

IS THE BIBLE RELIABLE?

But what about the third question, “Is the Bible reliable?” This is the question that our world answers with an emphatic, “NO!” Whether one is either an atheist or an agnostic, a Moslem or Jew, Hindu or Buddhist, the answer is always, “No, you can’t trust or believe the Bible.” They may have different beliefs but they all believe the Bible is wrong.

So it should not surprise us that the whole premise of the recent bestselling book “*The Da Vinci Code*,” is that the Bible is not only unreliable but it is not true. In fact, when I saw *The Da Vinci Code* movie trailer a few weeks ago, what did I hear? “*Witness the biggest cover-up in human history...a secret so powerful that if revealed would devastate the very foundations of mankind.*”

Now why all the commotion over this book and upcoming movie? Well, “*The Da Vinci Code*” has sold more than 40 million copies and has been translated into over 40 languages. And though it is fiction, author Dan Brown writes on the first page of his book: “*All descriptions of artwork, architecture, documents, and secret rituals in this novel are accurate.*” In fact, when asked in an interview with Matt Lauer of the Today Show, how much of the book’s history is based on actual events, Dan Brown has replied, “*Absolutely, all of it.*” And that my friends is the problem. The book is fiction but it refers to the historical people, events, and descriptions as truth.

So if you don’t know the facts, you can easily be misled, and that is exactly what is happening to many people. For although the book is a fast-paced entertaining mystery novel, the premise of the book is that our present day Gospels are fabrications, that the Church has tried to cover up the true identity and teachings of Jesus Christ, and that much of our world has been duped by this conspiracy. So I am very disturbed that many are being led astray. On the other hand, I

also believe it gives us a wonderful opportunity to look at the historical record, to see what really is true about our faith, and be able to defend it. **Jude 1:3** tells us “*to contend earnestly for the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints.*”

SOME SNIPPETS FROM “THE DA VINCI CODE”

Let’s briefly look at a few of the passages from “*The Da Vinci Code*,” to see how author Dan Brown fabricates history. Two of the main characters of the Da Vinci Code are Sir Leigh Teabing and Sophie Neveu, a French government cryptologist.

At one point in the book, Teabing tells Neveu “...*almost everything our fathers taught about Christ is false... many aspects of Christianity were debated and voted upon,*” including “*the divinity of Jesus.*” Neveu is shocked. She asks, “*I don’t follow, His divinity?*” Teabing continues, “*My dear, until that moment in history Jesus was viewed by His followers as a mortal prophet...a great and powerful man, but a man nonetheless. A mortal.*” Neveu says, “*Not the Son of God?*” “*Right,*” Teabing affirms. “*Jesus’ establishment as “the Son of God” was officially proposed and voted on by the Council of Nicea.*” Neveu is taken aback and says, “*Hold on, you are saying Jesus’ divinity was the result of a vote?*” “*A relatively close vote at that,*” Teabing replies.

So what is being said here? Everything the fathers (i.e. Church leaders) taught is false, the divinity of Jesus was voted upon, before which Jesus’ followers believed he was just a great and powerful man. And this change happened at the Council of Nicea (325 AD). The only thing that Dan Brown got right was that there was a Council of Nicea. However, the rest, as we will see later, is rubbish.

Teabing then refers to the Emperor Constantine’s need to consolidate his power and make Christianity the state religion of the empire. Teabing tells Neveu, “*To rewrite the history books, Constantine knew he would need a bold stroke. From this sprung the most profound moment in Christian history...Constantine commissioned and financed a new Bible, which omitted those gospels that spoke of Christ’s human traits and embellished those gospels that made him Godlike. The earlier gospels were outlawed, gathered up and burned...Fortunately, for historians...some of the gospels that Constantine attempted to eradicate managed to survive. The Dead Sea Scrolls were found in the 1950’s hidden in a cave near Qumran in the Judean desert. And, of course, the Coptic Scrolls in 1945 at Nag Hammadi. In addition to telling the true Grail story, these documents speak of Christ’s ministry in very human terms...The scrolls highlight glaring historical discrepancies and fabrications, clearly confirming that the modern Bible was compiled and edited by men who possessed a political agenda...to promote the divinity of the man Jesus Christ and use His influence to solidify their own power base.*”

Teabing goes on to say that the true Gospels weren’t Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John but were chosen from 80 other gospels to keep the male hierarchy of the Church in power and to make Jesus into God. The true gospels are the ones that show that Mary Magdalene was really Jesus’ favorite disciple. Moreover, Jesus actually married Mary Magdalene, they had a child, whose dynasty still survives in France. Jesus wanted Mary to lead the Church, not Peter, and the legend of the Holy Grail was not about the chalice used at the Last Supper, but the womb of Mary Magdalene. She “was the Holy Vessel...the chalice that bore the royal bloodline of Jesus Christ.” Finally, according to Teabing, ancient Jews and Christians experienced the Divine through “ritualistic sex” and such practices continued until the established church “engaged in a brutal crusade to “reeducate the pagan and feminine worshipping religions.” (see p. 125 *The Da Vinci Code*)

THOSE “OTHER” GOSPELS

So why this take on the history of the Church? Dan Brown is really not suggesting anything new. He is simply regurgitating old heresy and adding a new twist. Those “lost” gospels that were rejected by the Church were not suppressed by the Emperor Constantine for political purposes at the Council of Nicea in 325 AD. In fact, the Council of Nicea was not called to debate whether Jesus was divine or mortal. Its purpose was to declare whether or not Jesus was a co-equal with the Father or simply a created divine being. And the vote? It wasn’t even close 300 to 2, agreed that Jesus

was fully God and man and as God was never created and is coequal with the Father. The vote simply reflected what most Christians knew from their own study of the Bible.

The so-called “lost gospels” were considered false long before the time of Constantine (100-150 years earlier to be exact) and for good reason. Anyone reading them will see that they are often confusing, contradictory, and teach false spirituality that is the exact opposite of what the Old and New Testaments teach. Dan Brown’s so-called “suppressed” books were written by people who were members of the many Gnostic sects that competed with Christianity during the first three centuries of the Church. Many of their writings (52 not 80!) were found in 1945 at Nag Hammadi in Egypt written in Coptic (ancient Egyptian) and dated around 400 AD. The *Dead Sea Scrolls* (will talk about them in the next sermon) were Jewish writings, including much of the Old Testament and have nothing to do with the Gnostics or the early church! (another example of Brown’s poor history).

So who were the Gnostics? They were people who believed in a supreme unknowable being, who betowed upon some people a divine “spark.” Salvation came from special knowledge from this Supreme Being. When you received this divine spark you are set free from the evil natural world, which was created by an inferior evil god – the God of the Old Testament. Since the physical realm was considered evil, the body was also seen as evil, but the soul was seen as good. The Gnostics had no use for the Old Testament. Jesus was viewed as a conveyor of this secret knowledge, but Jesus never came in the flesh. So their emphasis was not on Jesus’ humanity but on His divine status as a divine being (another example of Brown getting his history wrong). Within this belief system there were many other beliefs that varied from group to group (much like the cults of today). The result of such thinking tended to foster knowledge without morality and exclusionary practices towards those who did not have the “right” secret knowledge.

The most popular Gnostic Gospels included the *Gospel of Philip*, the *Gospel of Mary Magdalene*, and the *Gospel of Thomas*. One only has to read these so called “gospels” to see that they do not even come close to the clarity, authority, and wisdom found in the four Gospels of the New Testament.

For example, in the DaVinci Code, we read that Teabing flips to the middle of the book entitled *The Gnostic Gospels*, points to a passage in ***the Gospel of Philip*** and then reads, “*And the companion of the Savior is Mary Magdalene. Christ loved her more than all the disciples and used to kiss her often on her mouth. The rest of the disciples were offended by it and expressed disapproval. They said to him, “Why do you love her more than all of us?”* We are told Sophie is not convinced. “*It says nothing of marriage,*” she says. Teabing responds, “*As any Aramaic scholar will tell you, the word, “companion,” in those days, literally meant spouse.*” Here again is another fabrication. While the quote from the Gospel of Philip is correct, it was written in Coptic not Aramaic. So to say that the word, “companion” means spouse in Aramaic is dead wrong. **In addition, there is absolutely no shred of historical evidence that Jesus was ever married to Mary Magdalene. Even the Gnostic Gospels do not claim such nonsense.**

But then Brown has Teabing quote from ***the Gospel of Mary Magdalene*** where Jesus supposedly gives special revelations to Mary Magdalene, causing Peter to complain, “*Did the Savior really speak to a woman without our knowledge? Are we to turn about and all listen to her?*” Why does Brown turn to these Gnostic Gospels? To stress the feminine nature of the Divine which according to Brown was ignored by the early Church hierarchy. The problem with Brown’s theory is that the Gnostic gospels do not even lift up feminism in any sense of the word. Women in the ancient world not only did not have the same rights as men; they were seen as inferior, both physically and spiritually. And this was no less true in Gnostic thought. Listen, for a moment to the last passage of ***The Gospel of Thomas***: “*Simon Peter said to them, Let Mary leave us, for women are not worthy of life.*” Jesus said, “*I myself shall lead her in order to make her male, so that she too may become a living spirit resembling you males. For every woman who will make herself male will enter the kingdom of heaven.*” Now contrast that with what we know from the four Gospels. Time after time, Jesus ministered to women. They were the first to see the empty tomb and see the risen Lord. The New Testament affirms women and womanhood unlike any text in the ancient world.

It should be added that ***The Gospel of Thomas*** is really no gospel at all. It has no theme, no actions of Jesus, no crucifixion, and no resurrection. It is simply a collection of 114 sayings of Jesus many of which bear little resemblance to the true gospels like, for example, **saying 22**, where the disciples ask Jesus, “*Shall we as children enter the kingdom?*” Jesus replies: “*When you make the two one, and when you make the inside like the outside and the outside like the inside*

and the above like the below, and when you make the male and the female one and the same, so that the male be not male nor the female female; and when you fashion eyes in the place of an eye, and a hand in the place of a hand, and a foot in the place of a foot, and a likeness in the place of a likeness, then you will enter the kingdom.”

The problem with all of these Gnostic writings is that they were written long after (100-150 years!) the four gospels and the rest of the New Testament, and they were shown for what they were, false teachings by the early Church Fathers. No wonder Irenaeus, Bishop of Lyon, wrote in 180 AD, “*every one of them (Gnostics) generates something new, day by day, according to his ability; for no one is deemed “perfect,” who does not develop some mighty fictions.*”

THE NEW TESTAMENT AND ITS RELIABILITY

The truth is that the books of both the Old and New Testaments are the most reliable documents in the ancient world. They were all written long before the Gnostic writings and their contents have been preserved almost completely word for word from the beginning of the second century, and in the case of the Old Testament hundreds of years before the time of Christ. There are literally thousands and thousands of manuscripts that anyone can study, compare and contrast. Moreover, in the New Testament, every single book declares the Deity of Christ and they aren’t secret writings. **Jesus said in Jn. 18: 20: “I have spoken openly to the world; I always taught in synagogues, and in the temple, where all the Jews come together; and I spoke nothing in secret.”**

For a book to be declared inspired by the early Church it had to be written by an apostle or someone in relationship with an apostle, could not contradict the OT or the teachings of the apostles, and had to be accepted by churches throughout the known world. So when the Church officially declared the books of the New Testament inspired they were recognizing books that were already being used by most Christians for the last 200 years! The Gnostic Gospels, on the other hand, had no apostolic authors, rejected the Old Testament, and were never universally accepted. Moreover, they are filled with outlandish and confusing claims only a few of which have been highlighted (see above).

WHAT’S THE BIG DEAL?

Why does this all matter? I am sure some are thinking well, this is just a novel, what’s the big deal? It is a big deal because Dan Brown has an agenda that is more than just making money. He believes what he is writing. Why does he believe it? Because when you think about it, the claims of *The Da Vinci Code* appeal to our modern day world. There is no final Word from God, no overarching authority, no Church of which we are obligated to be members, and no personal God to whom we are accountable. Rather, what is important is discovering the divine spark within you. This divine spark is your true self, which is the source of all truth. What’s important is not being in relationship with the God of the universe but following the “impersonal” force within you and the universe. Sexuality is not something to be respected and honored in the covenant of marriage; it is a means through which one can experience unity with the divine. Sexual differences don’t matter. Unlike the love that God demonstrates to us time and time again, this neo-pagan philosophy is self-centered and pleasure driven. It will not change lives but simply keep our world in bondage. It is a complete rejection of a loving God who seeks to have a personal relationship with us so that He can change us from the inside out and so that He can use us to bring His light and love to others.

You have heard me say it before. Truth is truth. You cannot change the truth. You may be able to suppress it for a while, but it always prevails. *The Da Vinci Code* may be making a big splash these days, but its days are numbered. It is fiction at its worst. And, it too, like the millions of books, which have preceded it, will soon be dead and gone in the collective memory of humanity. God’s Word, on the other hand, is THE TRUTH and it continues and will continue to change lives and prepare our world for the return of the Lord Jesus Christ. That’s why it is vital for us as disciples of the One True God and Lord Jesus Christ, that we know what we believe and why, and that we are able to give a defense for the hope that’s within us.

On this Mother’s Day, may we never forget that our true Mother is not Mother Earth. Our true Mother is the Church. And our responsibility is to serve the Church and glorify our Father in Heaven, always with Christ on our mind, on our lips and in our hearts, and always looking to the Holy Spirit (not some “Force”) but the Holy Spirit to guide, direct and enable us to do what God has called us to do. In the name of the One True God, forever the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, AMEN!