

## Homily for the Fourth Sunday of Lent Year C (14/03/2010)

This week I want to give some thought to the relationship between Catholic faith and science. It is sometimes said that modern science has explained away many of the mysteries that people once used to justify their faith in God. This is sometimes presented as a conflict between, on the one hand irrational and superstitious religion, and on the other hand reasoned and proven scientific knowledge. We are told that either a religious account of the world is true, or the scientific one is, and as the scientific version can produce evidence and proof, it has to be preferred.

In fact, this is a gross oversimplification. The truth is actually much more subtle. To begin to understand this dispute we have to make two brief excursions back in time, first to the seventeenth century, then to the nineteenth. The first will take us to Italy and to the controversy surrounding Galileo. This is sometimes presented as the first great battle between science and religious faith. Galileo was a student of Copernicus, and he had adopted his master's theory that the earth revolved around the sun, whereas the received wisdom of the day was that the sun revolved around the earth. Galileo was called to account for his views by the Church. This dispute is sometimes presented as irrational faith trying to defend the indefensible against evidence-based science, but this is misleading. We need to make a number of points very clear. One, for centuries before the time of Galileo, and for centuries after him, the Church sponsored scientific discovery, and many of the great scientists were not only convinced Catholics, but even priests and bishops. They saw no conflict at all between honest scientific investigation and Catholic faith. Galileo's story is important not because he was the beginning of a battle between science and faith but because he was a unique exception to the general rule that the Church was deeply committed to scientific discovery. Two, Galileo lived in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. This was a time of immense turmoil as the Church sought to combat the damage being done by the Reformation. It was not a good time for revolutionary new theories, and in particular the Church was anxious not to confirm protestant prejudices that it didn't take the scriptures seriously. If Galileo had lived in an earlier time he would probably have been received much more favourably. Three, Galileo had enjoyed considerable favour within the church, but he was, to say the least, a controversial character. He made his disagreement with the Pope into a personal dispute, and it was this that really dominated the proceedings against him. Four, the Pope asked Galileo to say that his theory was only that, a theory, but Galileo insisted on certainty. Ironically the Pope may have been more accurate here than Galileo, as he was in fact not able to provide proof to demonstrate his theory. Galileo was not tortured, as is sometimes said, and he lived in his own home under house arrest until the day of his death. This was not truly a conflict between science and religion, but between two stubborn men, and under Pope John Paul II the errors made by the church tribunal in handling the affair were acknowledged. It is most unfortunate that the Church did not take to heart Galileo's warning that that the Bible is given to us to teach us how to go to heaven, not how the heavens go; it is not a source of scientific knowledge.

The second name from the past that is sometimes brought up as a witness against religious faith is that of Charles Darwin. His theory of evolution appears to undermine everything that Christianity proclaims about the creation of the world. The creation account given in Genesis of the world being made in seven days simply cannot be

true. So, which side will we take? Will we stand with unreasonable religion that insists on the truth of the Bible in spite of the evidence, or will we go with rational science? This issue is confused by the fact that there are some Christian groups which still insist, in spite of scientific evidence, on the literal truth of the creation narrative in Genesis. Where do we stand?

The Catholic Church does not say that the creation story in Genesis is literally true in the sense that a newspaper report is true. The days of creation are a way of expressing a process that happens over time, something that is ordered, they are not a description of a literal event. Indeed it was St. Augustine who pointed out in the fifth century that, as the sun wasn't created until the fourth day, there cannot have been 'days' before that. People sometimes look at creationists, who insist on the literal truth of the first Genesis creation story, and say 'it is absurd to believe this is literally what happened'. Well, we don't believe that; if you want to criticize that theory, speak to the people who put it out, not to us. We believe that God created the world, in precise ways that we do not know, but the writer of Genesis, struggling to express this truth, puts it before us in the language of story and narrative. In fact the Big Bang theory, that the universe originated in a huge expansion from a compact fiery state, originated with the priest-scientist Fr Georges Lemaitre – just as the theory of genetics, which plays such a big role in the theory of evolution, originated with the Catholic priest Fr Gregor Mendel.

The more we look at the supposed conflicts between science and Catholic faith, the more we see them disappear. In fact, the church insists that faith and reason do not conflict. We say that God created the world, so anything that science can tell us about the way the world works is good, because it deepens our knowledge of God's creation. The fact is that science and religion are dealing with different types of knowledge. If I want to know what it is possible to do, science can help me. But this is not the only type of question that matters. I do not only want to know what is possible, I also want to know what is right, what I ought to do, and here science stumbles and we need to turn to faith. Asked 'what is a human being' science can give us a biological and a physical answer, but faith gives us an answer based on meaning and purpose. In his letter *Caritas in Veritate* the Pope warned of the danger of giving too much attention to the 'how' questions and not enough to the 'why' questions of human existence (n70). The truth, of course, is that scientists cannot manage without faith. They have to trust that the journals they read are telling them the truth; that the experimental results their colleagues produce are accurate; that their eyes and ears can be trusted in their observations; that an experiment that produces the same result ten times in a row will continue to do so indefinitely.

The Church's approach to science is quite subtle. On the one hand it rejects creationism, an approach to the world which rejects the value of scientific discovery; on the other hand it rejects scientism, the approach taken by some scientists which says that only observable and provable things have any real value. There are some aspects of human existence which can be observed and minutely described; there are others which cannot. The natural world is good, it is ordered, and it is comprehensible; these are principles on which science and Catholicism agree, and from this we can conclude that the two are not only compatible, but in fact they properly belong together. At a time when science itself is coming to be regarded by many people with suspicion and skepticism, the Church's wisdom may prove

essential not only to rescue religious faith from the more absurd claims of some extremists, but also to rescue and rehabilitate science. If we are to gain a better understanding of the created world in all its depth, science and religious faith need to make friends. Knowing what we can do, but being ignorant of what we should do, leads to tyranny and a domination of the weak by the strong; knowing what we should do but not what we can do leaves us powerless and frustrated; only a balanced ability to see what should be done, together with a powerful drive to increase and discover what can be done, can lead to real human development and flourishing. It is dangerous for science to exist in a kind of bubble, isolated from questions of faith and from culture in general, just as it is dangerous for faith to turn its back on what science can tell us about God's creation. Listen to Pope John Paul II:

*“Science can purify religion from error and superstition; religion can purify science from idolatry and false absolutes. Each can draw the other into a wider world, a world in which both can flourish.”* Letter To the Reverend George V. Coyne SJ  
Director of the Vatican Observatory June 1<sup>st</sup> 1988

Also, Pope Benedict XVI:

*“reason and faith work hand in hand to demonstrate to us what is good, provided we want to see it”* Caritas in Veritate n75

I want to end by considering briefly the problem of evil. Why does a good god allow bad things to happen? This could take up much more time than I have today, and of course there is no simple answer, but we can make a few observations. Human beings are created free, free to make choices that might be evil or merely foolish, and thus hurt others. Our vulnerability is to some extent the price of our freedom. But what about natural disaster, earthquakes and tsunamis? What is God up to? We cannot provide a simple and convincing answer. We might point out that world where wind and waves can be used to produce power also has the capacity to produce storms and floods, perhaps. We might ask what other sort of world would be better than the one we have – if there were no vulnerability to the forces of nature, and we all died peacefully in our beds on our seventieth birthday, would that necessarily be a better world? We know that God does not use natural disasters as a means of punishing people (Pope Benedict talks about ‘the facile conclusion that the evil is the effect of divine punishment’ [Angelus address, March 7<sup>th</sup> 2010]) but the best we can do is to cast around for partial answers, partial explanations. That is not really surprising. We feel that everything should be explicable, everything should be capable of an explanation that makes us say ‘ah yes, I understand’, but this is an illusion. If I understood the mind of God, if I was capable of understanding all that he wills, all that he intends, all that he allows, my mind would be greater than his, and that would be absurd. We must simply accept that while it is right to strive for understanding of our world, even mastery of it, there are some things which no amount of research, thought and investigation will unlock. Our generation that likes to think it is master of everything struggles with this, but a humble acceptance that there are some things beyond our intellects would do us no harm at all. In the end all we can really say about suffering is that God does not will anything that is evil, but the place he chooses to comment on suffering is on the cross. He is not aloof and remote, he is suffering, pained, and feeling the agony of desertion and abandonment.