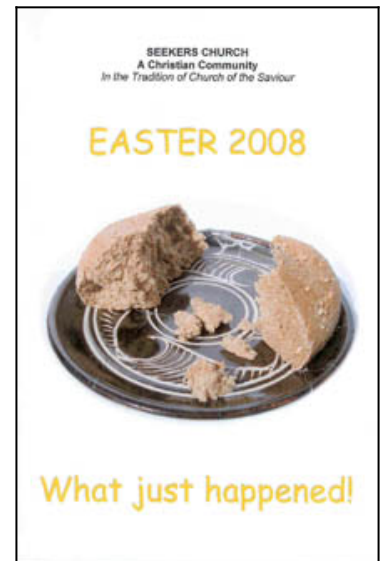


“The Day of Burnt Offerings is Over” by John Morris

April 27, 2008



In our readings for this Sunday, we seem to be invited into a new understanding of who God is. Jesus may disappear to the world, but to his disciples he will return, as a Holy Spirit of Truth, a Counselor. Paul rejects the idea that God must be “served by human hands, as if he needed anything.” “We should not think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone – an image made by man’s design and skill.” And some of you may have read the Psalm that is also part of the lectionary for this week. For me, this Psalm is the contrast; it represents the older view of who God is, which Jesus and Paul are urging their followers to reconsider. The Psalmist here is praising God for preserving the people of Israel; “you brought us to a place of abundance,” he cries, so “I will come to your temple with burnt offerings.”

Have you ever wondered what burnt offerings were, exactly? I never did, until I began working with these readings. So now

I can tell you that a burnt offering is a sacrifice to God that is wholly consumed by fire; the Hebrew word is "olah", the Greek word is formed from holos, whole, and kaustos, burnt. Holos-kaustos . . . yes, that's where we get the word "holocaust." And of what material were these offerings? Portions of animal flesh, generally. In this particular psalm, the singer promises, "I will sacrifice fat animals to you and an offering of rams; I will offer bulls and goats."

So often, in my experience, a revelation about the nature of God brings with it a new way of seeing the world. I can remember vividly the time in my life when I grasped the idea of the Counselor, the Holy Spirit. This was no abstract concept; this meant that I, as a Christian, was carrying around a little bit of God, inside me. What I remember best about all this is that it didn't result in some new intellectual understanding of the world, but rather an emotional comprehension, an awakening of compassion. It was as if, by carrying God around with me, I was given not a new set of brain cells, but a new heart, a new way of feeling. It was simply no longer possible for me to refuse to rejoice; at the same time, it was no longer possible to ignore the suffering of others.

Our beautiful church building is considering displaying a banner that says "Torture Is Wrong!" I'm sure that's a sentiment that each of us here feels strongly about.

"Millions of animals are used every year in the U.S. and abroad to assess the potential health hazards of cosmetics, soaps, household cleaners, pesticides, drugs, and other chemicals and products to which people might be exposed. In these assessments, chemicals are applied to the animals' eyes and skin or injected into their bodies, or the animals are forced to ingest or inhale them."

This is a quote from the Humane Society, hardly a fringe group when it comes to animal welfare.

And here is a quote from Pat Conover, who has spoken so eloquently to us about the sin of torture: "We can be thankful that we are sitting here today and are distant from the times and places of torture. In our thankfulness we can do some of the work needed to reduce the torture and the violence in the world. We can remember the story of Jesus going to the cross and refuse to be paralyzed by our fears. We can be hens for Jesus and gather his children under our wings. We can be thankful that there are things we can do as a free people to make our United States more caring and more responsible."

Here is another quote from Pat: "Suppose we decided to crucify one of our worshipers right now. Who would you pick? Who would volunteer for the committee to pound the nails?"

"You don't want to crucify a Seeker? Well, who would you be willing to crucify? Who would you be willing for the United States to crucify in your name? Who do you want to crucify for your protection, for the protection of the people you love?"

Torture is practiced for many reasons, but rarely for sadistic pleasure alone. Even the torture of Jesus was meant to do some good, as the Romans saw it: to discourage other disturbers of the peace.

When a dictator tortures his political opponents – when American interrogators torture prisoners at Guantanamo – there is a reason. Information is needed, confessions are required, just punishment must be meted out. We blind ourselves to the meaning of torture if we deny this. And it allows us to limit, to minimize, what counts as torture – to think of torturers as impossibly different, and distant, from ourselves. Torturers are not maniacs. They always have their reasons. And sometimes the reasons are so accepted, so taken for granted, that we call the torture "necessary" – and then give it some other name entirely.

A sociopath captures a rabbit and drips shampoo into its eyes.

A laboratory worker for Procter & Gamble does the same thing to dozens of rabbits.

What is the difference? The purpose, the reason.

We describe the sociopath as “torturing the animal,” and do everything in our power to prevent him from doing it again.

We describe the lab worker as “engaging in product testing,” and buy the product without a second thought.

Are there good enough reasons to torture? There may be. You’ve probably heard the notorious thought experiment that philosophers like to produce when this subject comes up. A dirty bomb has been concealed in lower Manhattan. With scant hours to go before the detonation, Homeland Security captures the perpetrators. They boast of what they’ve done, and refuse to reveal the location of the bomb. Do you torture them? Maybe. Do you torture their children, in front of their eyes? It might be even more effective.

Speaking of children, thousands are dying of cancer. We can torture laboratory animals to test possible drugs that may cure these children. Should we do so? Maybe. I had a conversation this week with Dave McMakin in which he described some research he was personally familiar with. By experimenting on mice, scientists were able to learn important facts about how human beings respond to attempted organ donations. Was this a good reason? Maybe. It is not an easy question to answer.

The fact that there are undoubtedly tough cases, hard decisions, should give us pause. It should not prevent us from looking at the easy cases, and making up our minds about those reasons. “Torture Is Wrong!” the banner cries. We don’t feel it necessary to place an asterisk on the banner, with a footnote that reads “Except possibly in cases of dirty-bomb detonation with hours to spare.”

And we can live with the uncertainty of whether animal torture might sometimes be

necessary, while speaking and acting firmly against the thousands of cases in which the reasons are so inadequate, indeed nonexistent, that it constitutes a crime against God and nature. I am thinking particularly about the torture that goes by the name of "product testing" – that is, not drug or medical experimentation, but the exposure of animals to non-medical household and personal products.

Here is a quote from People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals: "Hundreds of thousands of animals are poisoned, blinded, and killed every year in outdated and ineffective product tests for shampoos, household cleaners, cosmetics, hairsprays, and other personal care and household items. Although more than 600 companies have banned all animal tests forever, some corporations still force substances into animals' stomachs and drip chemicals into their eyes. These tests are not required by law, and they often produce inaccurate and misleading results."

Maybe you don't care for PETA. It's true, they were once considered a radical voice. Personally I believe they were prophets before their time.

But try this instead. Two Sundays ago, the Washington Post ran a front-page story headlined "In U.S., Few Alternatives to Testing on Animals; Panel Has Produced 4 Options in 10 Years." Here is how it began:

"Each year, American doctors inject more than 3 million doses of Botox to temporarily smooth their patients' wrinkles and frown lines. But before each batch is shipped, the manufacturer puts it through one of the oldest and most controversial animal tests available.

“To check the potency of its product under federal safety rules, Allergan Inc. injects mice with Botox until it finds a dose at which half the animals die – a rough gage of potential harm to humans.

“Animal protection groups consider ‘lethal dose 50,’ as the test is known, to be ‘the poster child for everything that’s wrong with animal testing,’ said Martin Stephens, vice president for animal research at the Humane Society of the United States. ‘It’s as bad as it gets, poisoning animals to death.’”

The federal panel charged with finding alternatives has come up with exactly four, and has only recommended, not required, their use. Well, perhaps that’s the best that science can do. Maybe testing products on animals is the only way we can ensure their safety for humans. No. The Johns Hopkins Center for Alternatives to Animal Testing was established in 1981, when alternatives research was not considered legitimate science. But Johns Hopkins has led the way in reducing animal use and, in some cases, replacing animals entirely, usually with in-vitro or safe human testing, providing legitimacy to the field and a reputable scientific framework in which this could happen.

In Europe, the contrast is even starker. To quote the Post, “Europe began moving away from animal testing more than 20 years ago. The European Commission voted in 1986 to require the use of alternative tests whenever possible. It later banned animal testing for cosmetics and passed other rules affecting chemical makers.” This Commission, unlike the U.S. panel, also researches and develops alternative tests.

But don’t we have laws about animal cruelty? What about the Animal Welfare Act? In an astonishing piece of Orwellian

“newspeak,” mice and rats are not considered “animals” in the provisions of the Act. I’m not kidding. I have to read this to you because otherwise you won’t believe it. This is from the USDA’s document entitled “The Animal Welfare Act and Its Regulations for Biomedical Research Institutions”: “The Definitions section describes exactly what is meant by terms used in the legislation. This section is very important as the legal definitions include exemptions which” – get this – “may differ from how the word is commonly used. For example, the term ‘Animal’ ... specifically excludes rats of the genus *Rattus* and mice of the genus *Mus* as well as birds used in research.”

“Exemptions which may differ from how the word is commonly used...” I’m reminded of how black slaves were once legally considered three-fifths of a human being. When a government resorts to such ludicrous distortions of language, you know someone is up to no good.

As a result, again to quote the Post, “There are no federal reporting requirements for mice and rats, which account for most of the animals used in product testing.”

No one knows how many of these animals are tortured each year, but most experts agree that the number is in the hundreds of thousands.

Of course, it’s only a mouse. How bad can that be?

I remind you of Pat’s challenge: “You don’t want to crucify a Seeker? Well, who would you be willing to crucify?”

I invite you to buy a few mice from your local PetSmart, shave their fur, and smear poisonous chemicals on their bodies.

Then let us know how bad it was.

God is constantly inviting us to a new and deeper understanding of who she is, of what it means to carry a little bit of God inside us. As a child, I learned not to be

cruel to my family and friends. As an adult, I learned that Americans should stick together. Then, as a Christian, I learned that we are all brothers and sisters, children of God. I have to love everybody. And finally, I believe I am called to love all creation, every living thing, as best I can. I say this in full awareness of my daily failures and hypocrisies, all the many ways I don't carry out even the most simple commands of love. But my own imperfections don't change the nature of God.

Animal welfare may not be your passion, as it is mine. We can't all make a passionate commitment to address every shortcoming of this sinful world. If we did, we'd soon be out of passion – and energy, and joy.

But we can, and do, take certain basic stances on a variety of issues, even if they're not our particular call. For instance, your work and volunteer energy may not center specifically on the issue of racial equality. But you certainly would not live in a deliberately segregated neighborhood, or patronize businesses that discriminated against minorities, or vote for bigoted politicians. These are just basic stances, the very least we can do.

I hope that you will decide that "Torture Is Wrong!" also calls for some basic stances, and that these involve the torture of animals as well. Here is the simplest: Don't buy household and cosmetic products that come to you via the laboratory torture chamber. And, every now and then, if you have a spare 15 minutes, write a brief letter to the parent company telling them why you're no longer giving them your dollars.

It is possible to end the holocaust that consumes the flesh of untold numbers of animals every year. The day of burnt offerings is over. Those of us who continue the practice can no longer claim ignorance, or necessity. We know God better now.

Outside, in the hall, there is a list of companies that engage in so-called "animal product testing," and a web link to a list of 600 companies that do not. Please help yourself.