

Church of the Resurrection - Easter 7B - Sunday After the Ascension – 5/24/09
Homily by Ruth Eller

*I am not asking you to take them out of the world, but I ask you to protect them from the evil one. They do not belong to the world, just as I do not belong to the world. . . .
As you have sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world.*

(John 17:18)

What does it mean to be in the world, but not belong to the world?

This is a confusing idea, and has led people into some pretty strange behavior over the years. If by “the world” you mean the physical universe, you might think that Jesus is saying that material things are bad, while spiritual—*unworldly*—things are good. This idea can be taken to ludicrous extremes.

A good example comes from the life St. Augustine, who lived in North Africa around the year 400. He was a bishop as well as a great thinker and writer. But as a young man, Augustine was really into Greek philosophy. Then he became a Manichean. In his autobiography—a literary form he pretty much invented—Augustine gives us a funny description of the beliefs and behavior of this sect.

The Manichees believed that the world was divided along strict lines of good and evil, light and dark. And—this is the funny bit—light and heavy. Not metaphorically light and heavy. We’re talking pounds and ounces. So the higher you rose on the ladder of knowledge, the less gross food you would eat. The true adepts did not participate at all in ordinary life, and ate only a very pure vegetarian diet—a lot of lettuce—which was provided for them by the lesser members of the sect, like the young Augustine. Eventually these higher ups hoped to free themselves entirely of their earthly shackles and literally float away.

This idea—matter bad, spirit good—crops up over and over again in history. It certainly found its way into church teaching from time to time. Today, certain elements of New Age thinking come close to this mindset. And there is at least one very successful modern cult, which actually takes periodic inventories (at a price!) of the heavy bits in your psyche which are preventing you from rising to the next spiritual plateau.

The story of Jesus’ ascension into heaven, which we celebrate today, might seem to support ideas like this. But I think we would all agree that such notions don’t square with the teachings of Jesus or with his Jewish tradition. The very first chapter of the Bible tells us that God created the world and saw that it was good. So then just what does Jesus mean in this prayer for the disciples, that like him they don’t belong to the world?

It all depends on how we understand the word “world”. If it’s not the physical universe, what is it? It seems to me Jesus is using this word in much the same way we would use the word “society”. We know that the society in which we live is a mixed bag. Often it seems that there isn’t much justice for the little person. The rich and powerful tend to call the shots. The satisfaction of various physical appetites appears to drive the economy. We even call that pattern “consumerism”. Beyond all that, random acts of violence and exploitation are constantly in the news.

On the other hand, there are good things in our society, too. People do help one another, not just individually, but through institutions like the Red Cross or Habitat for Humanity. Even government has become more compassionate than it was a hundred years

ago. For all its faults, there is such a thing as Medicare.

You might say that our society, the culture which surrounds us, is kind of like TV. There is a lot of wretched stuff on TV—sappy sitcoms, violent crime dramas, and so-called reality shows, which encourage the most unreal behavior. (Just how *real* is American Idol?)

But there are quite a few good things, too—way more than there used to be in the so-called Golden Age of television. (Believe me. I was there.) You can learn about all kinds of history and science from TV these days. And not all the cop shows are bad, either—some are even profoundly moral. What we viewers have to do is make appropriate choices among the offerings listed in TV Guide. If we don't, we're swamped with so much input that we can't tell right from wrong or quality from dreck any more.

When Jesus says his followers are in the world but don't belong to it, he's not making a judgment so much on the world itself as on the tendency the world has to swamp us with so many conflicting realities. If we let that happen, we are indeed prey for the Evil One. The distinction between right and wrong, beautiful and ugly even, becomes hopelessly blurred. Before we know it, we are no longer individual beings who make choices based on a firm set of beliefs. We are adrift, with no minds of our own. We lose our integrity in the swamp of ideas and activities, all of which compete equally for our attention. Monster truck rally, or cancer walkathon? Which shall it be? Oh, hell, what's the difference?

The only way for us to survive, to maintain our integrity, is to see things in proper perspective. As any artist knows, that means stepping away from the picture from time to time, so you get a sense of the whole, of the relation of one thing to another, of their comparative value. Artists talk like that—about values of shapes and colors, about balance. An artist steps back from a painting in order to be in that world, but not of it. The picture belongs to the artist, not vice versa. Jesus says his followers do the same kind of thing with the world. We are able to do this because we know how *he* sees the world—from a heavenly perspective—he is ascended—as well as an earthly one—he shares our humanity. And through his life and teachings, he has endowed us with the same vision.

As Augustine eventually figured out, there is no great wall between physical and spiritual reality. God made the physical world, and saw that it was good. Who are we to argue? You can eat more than lettuce. The classic Christian tradition never requires us to reject the things of this earth, as if they were of no account. This is why we care about the fate of the poor—right now, not just in the afterlife. This is why we found hospitals and schools. This is why we love music and all the arts. This is why we care for the good earth God has given us. Things of this world that bring health or truth or beauty of any kind—including the delight we experience when we watch a good TV show—we can see all of them as part of the goodness of the world.

Our choice is not between physical and spiritual. Our choice is between whatever conforms to the will of God for us and for the world and what does not. To make that kind of choice, it helps to look at all the listings—to stand back from the picture—to put things in perspective. To know that you do have the power of choice—and so the world belongs to you, not you to the world. This is what Jesus prayed for. This is what you can have, if you follow him not just *to* heaven, but *on* earth.