

### ***A Beautiful Mind***

In the name of Jesus, dear friends in Christ: It seems that once upon a time, way out in the old west, the Lone Ranger was riding along, and he came upon his trusted Indian companion, Tonto. Tonto was lying on the trail with his ear planted firmly to the ground. The Indian's face was all screwed up tight in what looked to be an almost painful look of concentration. Seeing the Ranger, but not moving a muscle, Tonto said, "Ah, Kimo Sabe ... Settler's wagon come ... pulled by four horses ... two black ... two brown. ... Settler's family: one man ... one woman ... three children. Settler have big yellow dog. Behind wagon ... dairy cow ... two pigs ... one pig have bad leg, walk with limp." The Lone Ranger was absolutely incredulous. He knew that Tonto was an excellent scout and tracker, but he had no idea that his hearing was so acute or his skill so refined. He asked, "How far away do you reckon they are?" Tonto answered, "At least two hours." The Ranger was completely flabbergasted, "Tonto, that's just *amazing!* It's hard to believe that you can just listen to the ground and give that kind of detail – even tell the color of horses – that are two hours away! I've half a mind to wait here until they arrive just to see how right you are." Tonto replied, "No need wait, Kimo Sabe. Wagon come two hours *ago*. *Run over Tonto.*"

Okay, it's an old joke; and a silly one at that. But perhaps I can redeem it a bit by saying that it helps (if only in a very small way) to illustrate what Paul is commenting upon in today's Epistle lesson. You see, in the story, the Lone Ranger is astonished at the knowledge displayed by Tonto because from the Ranger's own (mistaken) perspective, and given his own limited abilities, it would be impossible for him to have the knowledge and depth of insight that Tonto seems to have. Yet, from Tonto's point of view, it was no big deal at all. Similarly, though in a much greater sense, we hear St. Paul marveling at the immeasurable wisdom and knowledge of the Lord, which surpasses by multiple light-years the puny intellect and frail understanding of humankind's brightest and best super-geniuses. But to the Lord, it's business as usual. That's just the way he is. And of course, in the Lone Ranger story, there's a trick to Tonto's amazing insight. With respect to the Lord, there's no trick at all: his mental abilities really are that awe-inspiring. (And if that explanation doesn't work for you, try this: I thought a little joke would lighten this sermon up a bit.)

All right. Jokes aside, it should be a relatively simple concept for us to understand and accept: this idea that the Lord's knowledge and wisdom abound far beyond the highest reaches of our human intellect. We have only to spend a few moments considering the immense complexity and marvelous diversity and detail of even some small aspect of the Creation to soon get lost in wonder over the mind that was able to design, create, and sustain it. Or to say it more simply: it's pretty obvious that our God is really, really smart – a whole lot smarter than any of us will ever be. And we all know this. But even though we do know it, it still tends to trip some people up. When the Lord reveals truths that reach outside our understanding or experience, they have the attitude, "If I can't understand it, it cannot possibly be true."

Take, for example, the mystery of the Holy Trinity. In the pages of the Scriptures, the Lord clearly reveals himself as three distinct persons sharing one divine essence. Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are each one of them fully and completely God. They are distinct individuals and not to be confused with one another. And yet, there is only one God. Does it make sense to us? No. We have nothing in all of creation to compare it to. But then, God is unique. Why should we expect to find anything like him in creation? Shouldn't we rather expect that God be a being who is not confined to the regular rules of creation? And yet, this is a major sticking

point for would-be converts from Judaism, Islam, and many of the so-called “Christian cults”. They ask, “How can three be one and one be three?” Because it makes no sense to them, they reject it – and everything else about the truths and claims of Christianity. But hear what they are really saying, “If God is too much for me to understand, then I want no part of him.”

In a similar way, others deny the Lord’s revealed truth because what they read or hear lies outside their own experience. For example, someone might say, “I have never seen a miracle, miracles are not scientifically provable, and therefore the stories of miracles cannot be real.” This, sad to say, is the position taken by many mainstream protestant and catholic churches in the United States and Europe—and especially by the pastors, teachers, and theologians of these churches. Some go so far as to accuse the Bible of being anti-intellectual. Others, wanting to preserve the face of the faith while gutting it of its substance, seek to find the hidden meanings that lie behind the stories of miracles. They say that the poor, ignorant ancient people had no way to properly express their admiration of Jesus, and so they invented the miracle stories to help themselves appreciate and communicate to others what a great guy Jesus really was.

So also, with the account of the incarnation of the Savior: they say, “How can a virgin conceive a child? Answer: she can’t. Therefore, the story was made up in order to elevate Jesus into a class by himself.” What’s more, these pastors and theologians say that the ancients all understood that the stories were not true, but they somehow lacked the vocabulary to say what they really wanted to say. So, they kept the miracle stories, always winking among themselves, “Yeah, born of a virgin, uh-huh (wink, wink)—but not really!” The mistake was made generations later when people forgot to wink, and some poor slob actually started to believe the miracles. (And how I wish I were making this up.) They do the same thing with the account of Jesus’ resurrection from the dead. “Dead people do not get up and live again”, they say. “So when the disciples of Jesus spoke of his resurrection, what they were really trying to say was how they wanted his teachings and message of love to live on in their hearts. They just didn’t know how to say that.” This is the state of the majority of modern Christian theology. It rejects all of the basic truths of the Gospel. Why? Because they don’t fit conveniently into modern man’s “highly educated and scientific mind”.

And here is shown the real reason many people object to and get tripped up with a God who surpasses human understanding. It’s human pride, pure and simple. Their reasoning goes: “I’m smart. I’m intellectual. I’m educated. Therefore, I’m capable of understanding everything there is to be known. So, if I don’t understand it, it can only be because it’s not true. It couldn’t possibly be because of my own limitations.” And I’m sure you can see that this is nothing more than insisting that the thoughts of the infinite mind of God be small enough to be completely understood by the minds of his very finite creatures. It really makes no sense at all. But I think the reason people want a God whose mind is small is so that they can be gods themselves. Of such people the Scripture declares, “Thinking themselves wise, they became fools, and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images of mortal man...”

But it doesn’t end there. Even among Bible-believing Christians there is a reluctance to allow God’s wisdom to be supreme, and a tendency to insist that everything he reveals to us fit neatly within the limits of our own comprehension. For example, when Jesus says in the Sacrament, “Take, eat this is my body given for you ... Take, drink, this is my blood shed for you”, many Christians assert he can’t possibly mean what he says. With the Jews who argued with Jesus they ask, “How can this man give us his flesh to eat?” “After all”, they reason, “He’s sitting right there in front of them when he says it! And now he’s gone to heaven. You can’t take his words literally. They don’t make sense.” And so, through unbelief and an unwillingness

to admit that God's thoughts and ways are higher than our own, they deprive themselves of the great comfort and spiritual blessing that Christ gives to his church in Holy Communion.

And what about us? Maybe we could bring this a little closer to home. I expect that there are some things that most of us are just dying to know, or have the Lord explain to us. There are a few big mysteries that we just can't figure out, and sometimes not having the answer makes us uncomfortable, or worse, causes us to doubt. There is, for example, the problem of evil. The questions are usually framed like this: If God is good, and everything he created was perfect, how did sin enter the world? If God knows everything, why did he create Satan, since he knew he was going to fall and lead mankind to fall too?

Or there is the mystery of eternal election and salvation. The questions go like this: Why are some saved and not others? If salvation is entirely the work of God (that's true), if fallen man is unable to come to faith without the power of God granting new life through the Word (*that's true*), and if God wants all people to be saved (also very true), then why isn't everyone saved? If he does it all, why doesn't he do it for everyone?

Or some of us, perhaps, are hung up on questions of origins stemming from the difference between the biblical creation account and what modern science would have us believe about millions of years of evolution. "I want to believe the Bible, but what about all those fossilized bones? What's the deal there?"

Or maybe some of the questions you grapple with are a bit more personal: "Why did this disaster happen? Why did I get sick? Why did I have this accident? Why did I lose my job, or my business, or my farm? Why did this person have to die? *It just wasn't right*. It's clear that the Lord made a mistake." In such cases, and I'm sure we've all been there, think about what you're saying: "Excuse me, but I understand this situation better than you do, O Lord. And I think I know how to fix it better than you."

It reminds me of that Old Testament saint, Job, who had a lot of questions about the problem of human suffering that he saw in his life. "Why was it," he wondered, "that righteous people were always being afflicted? Why do good guys finish last? Why are the poor persecuted? Why do their oppressors always seem to get away with it?" Job had a lot of questions for the Lord. And the thought behind all the questions was an accusation, "Lord, if you're the judge of the world, you're sure doing a lousy job of it. I'm sure that I could do better than you."

And so we see again that frustration we feel when we have questions about the Lord's way of doing business – and especially when we are critical of him – stem from the mistaken and prideful assumption that our own wisdom and knowledge are greater than his. We think the Lord should have to explain his ways to us, as if he owed us an explanation, as if we were smart enough to see and understand like he does.

When we have such questions, we would do well to consider how the Lord responded to Job. It was not with a straightforward answer to his query, but rather with a long list of his own questions. Questions like: "Where were you when I stretched forth the starry hosts of the heavens? Can you explain to me how I did it? Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth? C'mon, smart guy, tell me all about how that was done." There are two fairly long chapters of nothing but similar questions that the Lord puts to Job, not because the Lord expects Job to answer, but rather because he knows that Job can't. The purpose of these questions is to remind Job of whom it is he's dealing with. It's to tell him that he's way out of his

league intellectually; that he can't fight a battle of wits with God because (relatively speaking) he doesn't have any ammunition.

And after hearing all this, Job puts his hand over his mouth and says, "You're right, Lord. I have absolutely no idea what I'm talking about. It was wrong of me to imagine that you needed my advice. I'm sorry. You won't hear any more complaints or questions from me."

And perhaps we all need such a reminder now and then; something of a refocus that tells us that as much as we like to think it, we are not the center of the universe, nor is man the measure of all things. God is. And when we do that, put our focus back on him and his glory, and his might, and his wisdom, we just might get lost in wonder like the psalmist and ask, instead of a bunch of fruitless and accusatory questions, something really significant like: "Lord, in light of all that you are and have done, what is man that you are mindful of him?" There's a question worth grappling with: why does the Lord, as great as he is, bother with us at all? Talk about great mysteries! That's surely the greatest.

And that's a mystery for which our God has given us the answer. It doesn't lie in us, but in him. Specifically, it lies in his limitless love – the love he had for us in Christ Jesus before the foundation of the earth. The love that moved him to create us in the first place, the love by which he redeemed us from sin by the bloody sacrifice of his Son, and the love by which he called us by the Holy Spirit to saving faith so that we could share his love forever in glory.

Focusing our attention on the answer to that question causes all the other questions we have to just sort of fade away. It causes us to marvel again at the glorious and beautiful mind of God, and praise him for his mercy and love for us, so that we join with Paul in his joyous outburst, "Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments, and how inscrutable his ways! 'For who has known the mind of the Lord? Or who has been his counselor?' 'Who has ever given a gift to him that he might be repaid?' For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be the glory forever! Amen.

***Soli Deo Gloria!***