

Magisterial and Ministerial

Every Sunday morning I face a moral, ethical, decision. In my car I approach the traffic signal at the intersection of Route 48 and Old William Penn Highway. The traffic signal is red. What do I do? I stop, of course. Why do I stop? Everyone knows you stop at a red light. It's the closet thing there is to a universal law. "Green means go and red means stop" is something we learn as toddlers, if not before that. There may be other reasons as well. For instance, run a red light and you might get a traffic ticket. Nobody wants to pay a fine. And more importantly, run a red light and you might cause an accident. Someone could get seriously hurt.

But it's about 6:55 a.m. most Sundays when I'm sitting at that intersection and there is usually no one else on the road. I know in my heart that if I run that red light no one will and no one will get hurt, and I'll get to the church a few minutes sooner. So what's the big deal? I should just do it, right? Well, it's dark this time of year when I'm stopped at that intersection waiting for the light to change.

Maybe in the dark there is a police officer lurking unseen by me on our church's parking lot. They do that sometimes. My clerical collar, and the fact there were no other cars on the road, and the fact that I know many of the Monroeville policemen, won't change the fact that I broke law and will get a ticket. Worse yet, it's dark, and maybe there is a car I didn't see coming in the other direction. Although it's unlikely, running that red light could cause an accident, and the innocent driver or me could be injured or even killed. And even worse than that, what if someone found out I broke the law? I wouldn't want anyone, especially a young person, to think, "Pastor Ash breaks the law, why can't I?"

Jesus says that we cannot serve two masters, and that's what I'm trying to illustrate with my traffic light story. Jesus specifies that we cannot serve both God and wealth, perhaps

better translated *mammon*, meaning this-worldly riches gained in a greedy, unethical way, and worshiped like an idol. But the fact is that there are many things that we trust, serve, and worship above the Lord our God, and all of them, wealth certainly included, have to do with putting ourselves, our comfort, and especially our pride, our egos, above our love of and submission to the Lord.

If I run that red light, I'm saying that my desire to get church early is more important than the traffic laws. I'm saying that I trust my own judgment better than the judgment of the people who make and enforce the law. I'm saying my wisdom is greater than the collective wisdom of how many generations of people who said a red light means stop, regardless of the circumstances. Now my analogy, like all analogies and illustrations, breaks down because traffic laws are a human invention, not a divine decree, and human beings, unlike God, are fallible. But the point is that we often put our trust in ourselves, or in other people, or in human inventions and constructs, rather than God and His Word.

In Lutheranism, we talk about something called the Magisterial and the Ministerial use of reason. And here we can substitute concepts like science, history, archaeology, psychology, philosophy, or even common sense, or any other human produced wisdom, for the word *reason*. To use reason, or science or whatever, in the magisterial sense is to make it the ultimate judge of everything. If we say, "I believe the Bible in so far as it agrees with science, or history, or whatever I believe to be true," then the Bible is not really our ultimate authority, something else is. And that something else is ultimately us, our thoughts, our feelings, what we think. God alone is sovereign, His Word is truth, and bowing to the majesty of reason before bowing to God is disordered.

But if we say, "I believe in the Bible as the foremost authority and I believe that reason and archeology and other disciplines can heighten and sharpen our understanding of Holy Scripture and our discernment of God's will," then that is the ministerial use of reason and

it is a righteous thing. Using reason in that way recognizes the absolute authority of God and keeps mankind in our place, which is always a place lower than God. Left unchecked, human reason will tell you that creation was an accident and that there was no purpose in it and no Creator. Reason will tell you that virgins don't have babies and that dead people stay dead, that is, Jesus didn't rise from the dead. Reason will tell you that bread and wine cannot be Christ's body and blood. Those ideas are all rational, logical.... and false! If they were true, our faith is a lie, we are lost in our sins, and we have no hope. But Jesus Christ, the Son of the Father from all eternity, was born of virgin, died, and rose again. He is bodily present here in the sacrament and speaks to us through the Bible. You cannot prove any of those statements empirically... but every one is true.

Recently a regular reader of my blog posed the question to me, "Do believe in the Bible because of God, or do you believe in God because of the Bible?" The trendy answer these days is to say, "I believe in the Bible because of God." Actually I think the correct answer is both/and not either/or. But I feel constrained to make a case for the idea that we can only really know God through the Bible.

It's true that all of Creation testifies to God. How can anyone look at Creation and not see purpose, design, and beauty? But merely observing nature will never bring you to a full appreciation of God. Observing a flower won't take you to the Ten Commandments. In fact, the law of nature seems to be the "survival of the fittest," which strikes me as opposed to the Christian concepts of mercy and compassion. Watching a lion take down a wounded wildebeest will not teach us to "do unto others as you would have them do unto you." It's also true that God has given each of us a conscience. We usually know intuitively when we are doing something wrong, although many of us are good at squelching the voice of our conscience. Yet, just knowing when we do wrong doesn't lead us to the forgiveness that only flows from the cross of Christ.

Maybe all the various non-Christian religions are just ways that human beings have tried to conceive of God and assuage their guilty consciences apart from God's self-revelation in Christ and His Word. Tried and failed. None of them have reached the Trinity or the Atonement through sheer human observation and contemplation. We can only truly know God as He reveals Himself to us. He did that in Christ and He does that in Holy Scripture. God's plan of salvation for all humanity is that all people might come to Him through Jesus Christ and the proclamation of the Word.

Once again I feel constrained to re-state something that I may not stated as clearly as I could have in the past. The question is often asked, "How did we get the Bible?" It just didn't drop out of the sky. The Holy Spirit inspired human authors to record God's Word. In the early years of the church, the Four Evangelists and Paul and other men of God were chosen and empowered for this task. But how were their writings recognized as inspired utterances? I used to say that a Council judged the books that were commonly in use on the basis of their authorship and witness, and they then decided what would go in the New Testament canon. A better way of saying that would be that the inspired books authenticated themselves with the truth and power of their witness and authorship, and these writings were recognized and preserved by the Church as their scriptures under the direction of the Holy Spirit.

The bottom line of all this, the point Jesus drives home in today's portion of the Sermon on the Mount, is that God is in control. The power is all His, not ours. Our worrying won't change anything; it's useless. All our high technology, all our wisdom – even that computer Watson that won on *Jeopardy* – cannot outsmart God. Don't ever think we've outgrown God. Don't ever think we don't need Him anymore. Everything is in His hands. So we can just sit back and let God be God. We can relax, and live confidently and boldly, because God will take care of us, one way or another. He loves us and we can depend on Him. It's going to be all right. Amen.