Sunday, February 25, 1979
TEMPTATIONS OF RELIGION (No. 2 in a Series: Spiritual Imperialism)
Mark 2:18-22

Here's a word you can use to impress your friends! The word is "paradigm." In its simplest definition, a paradigm is a model or a pattern. But the meaning of the word goes beyond that. A paradigm is also a shared set of assumptions; it is the way in which we perceive the world. For example, for centuries, people believed the earth to be flat. That way of seeing the world at that time seemed to make the most sense.

Some people still believe that paradigm makes the most sense. A few years ago, an article appeared in the newspaper which told about the International Flat Earth Research Society. This Society teaches that the world is flat and that the space program is a multi-billion-dollar hoax. In the article, the president of the International Flat Earth Research Society was quoted as saying: "The teachings of our society will triumph and bring an abrupt end to the four-century reign of those who contend the earth is a spinning ball hurtling around the sun."

He went on to say, "Our beliefs are based on experience, not on mathematical scribblings...We do not accept theory which is imaginary...the proper view of the universe can be drawn from a reading of the book of Genesis in the Bible. God created the heavens above and the earth below and there should be no further doubt about the matter." The earth is flat and extends infinitely in all directions, although the known world is saucer-shaped because it is hemmed in by an impenetrable 150-mile-high wall of ice that forms a south pole around the rim of the saucer. The sun is a 32-mile-high spotlights that moves in a circle 3000 miles above the north pole at the center of the known world. Charles Johnson, the president of the Flat Earth Society, said he began doubting the world was round while he was in grammar school. "The first time I saw a globe it just didn't make sense," he said.

Mr. Johnson also rejects the theory of gravity as absurd. "If the world were round, the Australians would be hanging by their feet as they spin through space," he said. And his wife Marjory is an Australian, and she has never hung by her feet.

To the members of the International Flat Earth Research Society, the 16th century Copernican revolution, is just a dusted off version of an ancient Greek myth. The society calls the round-earthers illogical, a mathematical cult and people who are willing to accept things on blind faith.

Another well-known historical paradigm is the Greek Ptolemaic view of the world. Here the earth is in the middle of the universe. For as any fool can plainly see, the sun comes up in the east, moves over head and sets in the west and the stars move around in very predictable sources. Thus, Ptolemy's paradigm won out in its day because it seemed to explain the world better than its competitors.

Paradigms come in all sizes and shapes, and we all use them to explain and try to understand our experiences and the world around us. Thus far we've been describing large cosmological paradigms.

In the Bible, for the most part, the cosmological paradigm is that which was then current in the ancient near east — none other was available although it was adapted to Israel's belief in a transcendent God and to the faith of the Hebrews, the paradigm did not hold much importance. They simply used what was available.

This particular paradigm held that the earth is flat and surrounded by water. The heavens across which the sun, moon and stars move, are enclosed by a solid cover, the firmament, half spherical in shape. Above the firmament is water which comes down as rain through holes in the firmament. Below the earth is the realm of the dead sometimes called Sheol in the Bible.

This paradigm forms the background of most Biblical writings and is presupposed in language and images. Yet in the Bible, it is not given any great weight or religious meaning. The central message of the Bible and of the Christian faith is not ultimately dependent upon any particular paradigm. In the Bible, God is said to be above the firmament, yet God is active in the creative process but is not made part of the cosmic scheme. What has importance for the biblical writers is not the structure or process of the cosmos but its creation by God.

It's when we make the paradigm, the structure, into a fixed scheme of things, unchangeable that we become spiritual imperialist. It's one of the temptations of religion.

This has happened in the past and still happens today. Every now and then I have received in the mail or from someone personally literature from the fringe religious groups which claim to have a privileged knowledge of the structure and workings of the cosmos. Some of the literature is complete with maps, diagrams, and tables presenting a complex cosmology with confident detail.

But not only fringe groups are subject to the temptation of cosmic vanity and spiritual imperialism, but mainline religions as well. Sometimes the cosmic vanity or spiritual imperialism takes the form of opposition to newly proposed paradigms because it threatens their own view.

For example, the Greek paradigm developed by Ptolemy and referred to earlier, the earth being round and at the center of the universe, was opposed by many 4th century Christians in the name of the Bible. Like the flat earth society of today, they used an earlier paradigm to oppose the new one. Lactantius, for example, ridiculed the Greek idea of a spherical earth, scornfully asking, "do the mean at the antipodes walk upside down?" Then in the 6th century, Cosmas, a monk in the monastery of Sinai, worked out a comprehensive cosmology on biblical lines in direct opposition to the Greek view. For him, the earth was flat; its shape that of the Holy Tabernacle as described in the book of Exodus in the Bible, namely rectangular, and its length twice the width. The ocean surrounds the earth, and across the ocean and surrounding it is a second earth, the place of the Garden of Eden and the home of human beings until Noah, but now uninhabited. From the outer earth rise the walls of the universe, and he then went into much more detail in order to take into account various biblical passages. Fortunately, the paradigm of Cosmas never became authoritative among Christians.

By the 13th century, the Aristotelian and Ptolemaic accounts of the cosmos were taken for granted by all educated people. Thomas Aquinas used this cosmological paradigm as the basis for his theological synthesis.

Now the cosmology created by the pagan Greeks and earlier opposed by suspicious Christians in the name of the Bible, was invested with a wealth of religious meaning. The supreme literary expression of that paradigm is in Dante's Diving Comedy, and that still has a subtle influence in some Christian thought today.

The earth is the center. It is surrounded by concentric spheres which carry around the planets and stars in circular motion. There are also concentric spheres within the earth and at the center is the home of the devil. Thus, God is up, and the devil is below.

The paradigm became the setting for the Christian drama of sin and salvation. A religious system was formed in which people in a hierarchical world worked out their salvation or damnation in the sublunary region between the angels above and the devil below. Many of the texts of our hymns still reflect this cosmology or paradigm. “Praise God from whom all blessings flow; Praise God all creatures here below. Praise God above ye heavenly host. This cosmology was even used to justify the present organization of society. It’s the temptation to spiritual imperialism at work.

It’s no wonder the Copernican revolution and the rise of yet another paradigm caused a religious and social upheaval. The earth was removed from the center and became a moving planet. Even more upsetting, the universe was described as being infinite, not limited and enclosed. There was now no center at all, so that the very notion of an ordered hierarchical series of substances and regions no longer applied. The spiritual imperialists naturally fought the change.

The whole understanding of human beings, social as well as religious was affected. Thus, the older cosmology was defended as a factual, objective, infallible account of the universe, and the church claimed it was even divinely inspired. Those who supported the new paradigm were branded as heretics.

What then are some of the paradigms that affect us today? In addition to our present understanding of the cosmos, there is also the paradigm of relativity. Another grand paradigm in which we live is that which emphasizes the scientific and the rational. By and large we believe that what is measurable and repeatable is true. And that’s all right. But we often go the next step and imply that if something is not repeatable or measurable with our present understanding of what measurement is, it is not true. Dreams are not easily measured or repeatable, for example. Could you get a message from your grandmother across the country, no telephone, straight extra-sensory perception? Not according to our main paradigm.

Is there any way we can know the future? Not according to our present paradigm? Crazy Horse, the Sioux Chief claimed he got messages that told him the future even as to who would kill him — but Crazy Horse did not have very accurate measurements and the experiments were not repeatable.

Our scientific paradigm has helped produce the technological achievements in the western world. But it leaves us with a problem, and that is that we have an unconscious tendency to consider as “real” or “true” only that which can be measured and repeated. Scientific imperialism or vanity can be as powerful as religious or spiritual imperialism.

Obviously, paradigms have great utility. We’ll never do away with them. They provided us with a common understanding, with a ground for communication, with common assumptions. But we need to remember they also limit us. What we often forget is that we made up the paradigm in the first place.

Paradigms become corrupting when we too closely connect them with out religion so that our religious faith comes finally to be based upon them. Then we are tempted to reduce God so

that God fits within our system or paradigm, and we come to believe that God operates according to the way we have defined the world works.

Once we do this the paradigm itself is invested with spiritual values which can lead to spiritual imperialism and other kinds of imperialism as well. The case system in India was originally seen as founded upon the structure of the cosmos in Hindu mythology. Male — female relationships in much of the world are the result of humanly constructed paradigms often given too much religious significance. We justify our actions by saying — "That's the way the world is put together and therefore that's the way God wants it." We all are members of certain kinds of flat earth societies.

How then can we avoid spiritual imperialism and the cosmic vanity which often goes with it?

1. Remember, paradigms will always change. They are human constructions. We will continue to understand and describe the earth and the universe and disease and everything in new ways. We need to see paradigms for what they are — attempts to describe the way the world is put together; then perhaps we will not elevate them to the status of absolute truth.

2. This means secondly, we need not be afraid to change paradigms when necessary. There are occasions which demand new wineskins, new garments, as Jesus Christ put it. The Pharisees were saying to Jesus — "the old is good enough. Why question it? It was good enough for Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, so why isn't our way of seeing and describing the world and how God works good enough for you?" But there are times when we cannot patch the new onto the old.

3. Thirdly, and most importantly, remember our Christian faith is not dependent on any one paradigm or cosmology or scientific theory. The God we worship cannot be contained within any one of them. Even our religious paradigms are only partial and subject to change.

We can commit ourselves to the basic message of the gospel — to the fact that God loves us and forgives us, without being tempted to spiritual imperialism. We can give this good news to others without insisting at the same time that they accept our cosmology.

Our faith in the God revealed in Jesus Christ is secure enough to live with changing images of God, as well as changing images of the world. We need not be panicked into a narrow fundamentalism. Hopefully our faith will provide a setting where people do not impose beliefs arrogantly but rather share them humbly. Amen.