

GOD AS CHICKEN

In order to make the most sense of where we're going this morning in these few minutes, we need to understand something of the history of religions.

From time immemorial, humanity has struggled to understand the gods in the best manners that it could. It is no easy thing, though, for a finite mind to try to talk about, let alone to comprehend, the Infinite. As a result, those who make the attempt do so by comparing the unknowable Divine to the known dimensions of human experience.

The holy and demonic powers are conceived to be associated with the physical universe itself--identified in terms of the earth or sky, planets and stars, the sun and the moon. And almost everywhere, from the religions of the ancient world to Judaism itself, the Divine is always understood to be associated with certain specific animals. In fact, in the more primitive religions, the gods are thought, not just to be represented by or associated with certain animals, but even themselves to assume distinctive animal forms--as cat or bull, crocodile or cow, deer, monkey, and even snake.

We modern religionists probably give our earlier spiritual roots little thought, but this basic associating of God with animals is easily traced into our own faith. Says Yahweh to the prophet Isaiah, "Like a bull, I have brought down those who sat on thrones" (10.13). This Lord says to Jeremiah, "Like a lion coming up from the thickets of the Jordan . . . I will suddenly chase Edom away from it; and I will appoint over it whomever I choose (Jer 49.19). And who could forget the talking mule of Balaam or the descending dove on Pentecost, or the remarkable four-faced creature in Ezekiel's inspired vision, three faces of which are faces of animals--lion, ox, and eagle?

Animals, it seems, naturally insinuate themselves everywhere into the spiritual order.

About now, you may be wondering what in the world any of this has to do with Mother's Day. You'll be glad to know that there is a point here. That point is that all of this leads us to consider more thoughtfully the pair of readings we have heard moments ago, readings which, taken together, suggest that one of the ways in which our God can be understood is, unbelievably, as a chicken.

"[God] will cover you with his pinions [i.e., feathers]," says the Psalmist, "and under [God's] wings you shall find refuge" (91.4a). Drawing on the same sort of imagery, Jesus speaks consolingly to Jerusalem, expressing God's desire "to gather [My] children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings . . ." (Mat 23.37b).

This, no doubt, is quite a revelation! God is like a chicken!

We probably fail to grasp immediately the power of this imagery. After all, for us, "chicken" means something silly or weak or, worse, cowardly. These are unfortunate personal

associations. For us, to be termed a “chicken” is to be given a taunt. It is to be demeaned as a sort of gutless wonder--all of which, of course, is about as far away from the Bible’s position as we could possibly get.

To appreciate that Biblical meaning, I have to tell you a story from my boyhood. As you know, I grew up in the area here, with cousins who lived (and still live) on a farm outside Millmont. Many summers I would visit with them for a week or two (usually, it seems, during hay-baling season, where I served as additional free labor--I do wonder about the curious coincidence of that!).

In any case, as on all farms, they had animals, including chickens. Remember, I grew up in the cosmopolitan world of Watsontown. I was the “city-slicker”! What did I know about chickens? Little could I imagine that I was about to learn quite a lesson at the hands of a chicken!

I was visiting the henhouse, which happened at the time to have a number of new peeps. They were adorable, of course, and irresistible, so I began to pursue a small group of them in the hopes of being able to pick one of the fuzzy little things up and coddle it. At least that was the plan, until my gestures were interpreted as threatening and unwanted, and to be discouraged, by a certain red-feathered hen, which promptly assaulted me. (I still have nightmares!)

As near as I can recall, all these years later, “flopped” was the word that my cousin used to describe what happened to me. Believe me, you haven’t experienced it all until you’ve been duly “flopped” by a chicken! Such a beating with beak and claws and feathers I had never taken before or since. “Flopped” indeed! So much for “chicken” as a pejorative category! This one was absolutely fearless!

The hen, of course, was just being protective of her young, instinctively attacking a creature who outsized her and outweighed her by many times. Yet, despite the utterly impossible odds inherent in this combat, in the face of potential endangerment to her young, there was absolutely no hesitation in her speedily rising to the urgent challenge.

I know some human mothers like that, too. You know the attitude: “Not with my kid, you won’t!” The “great-mothers,” of course, have those same sorts of feelings towards anyone’s kid, towards all kids. If you’re up against one of these “great-mothers,” you don’t mess with the youngest among us--unless you are looking for a good, sound . . . well, “flopping.”

From the Biblical perspective, the point is that God regards each of us, and all of us, in precisely these terms. We are so precious that no effort is to be spared to protect and shelter us. We are so utterly valued that all focus is to be brought to the business of loving and caring for us humans--for us who are, as it were, the “peeps” of God.

It’s a compelling notion and, I dare say, one well-timed for this occasion of Mother’s Day--that we should live out our lives with the full consciousness that, all the while, we best experience our days and nights, our joys and sorrows, our accomplishments and failures, our gains and losses, all under the outstretched wings of God.

God as Mother Hen.

God as Mother.

Now, there's a thought!