

Godforsaking Religion

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[0 : 00] St. John's Shaughnessy Church It will be of some significance if you will turn in your Bible to page 636 in the Old Testament section to chapter 42 of the book of the prophet Isaiah.

The title that I have given to this talk this morning is God Forsaking Religion.

And that's because there is emerging in our society that we've tried most of the forms of religion and found them wanting.

And so we're now going to create a new religion in which we don't have to deal with God, which seems to be the main stumbling stone for most of us.

So, we are producing God Forsaking Religions. But there's another way you can read the title, which I would like you to consider as well.

[1 : 42] And that is that among all the devoutly religious people of the world, there may come a point historically when God forsakes religion.

In other words, he no longer can work through those communities which consider themselves to be religious. That the whole religious world will have to be trashed in order for God to achieve his purpose.

Now, you won't know where I'm going, and that's partly because I don't. But it might be a help if we defined God to begin with.

And in order to do that, I would like you to turn and read with me from page 695 of your prayer book. There was a time in the Christian church when they were very careful to define who the God is whom we worship.

Now, it's just a sort of vague word which means virtually nothing, and it means something different to most people who use it.

[3 : 04] There was a time, as you will see by reading this with me, when people were acutely aware of precisely what they meant by the word God.

And we'll read it. Let me just read it from verse 3, and we'll read it responsibly, because you'll enjoy that, I'm sure. We'll read it responsibly by verses.

695. 695. The Catholic faith is this, that we worship one God in Trinity and Trinity in unity.

Let me just read it again. Look it.

Such as the Father is, such is the Son, and such is the Holy Ghost.

[4 : 15] The Father is the Son, and the Holy Ghost is the Son. The Father infinite, the Son infinite, the Holy Ghost infinite.

And yet there are not three Eternals, but one Eternal. So likewise, the Father is Almighty, the Son, Almighty, the Holy Ghost, Almighty.

And yet there are not three Eternals, but one Eternal. So the Father is God, the Son, God, the Holy Ghost, God.

And yet there are not three Eternals, but one Eternal. So the Father is Lord, the Son, Lord, the Holy Ghost, Lord.

And yet there are not three Eternals, but one Eternal. For like as we are compelled by the Christian verity to confess each person by himself to be both God and Lord.

[5 : 43] So are we prepared by the path of religion to see the three of us or the three of us. So as Christians, we're very specific about what we mean by God.

And that passage, the creed that we've just read, is an attempt to take all the teaching of Scripture and put it in tension with one another.

It's not, well, I think the best way is to say that all these concepts have to live in tension with one another for the fullness of the concept of the God in Trinity whom we worship.

Now, that's what Christians worship. That's the one. And that's what we're talking about, the living God. Now, there are in our world many different kinds of what I call institutional religions.

One of them is Christianity. Christianity is generally regarded by, I mean, if you think of our scientific world having a series of clusters of white mice in the laboratory, and one cluster is the Christians.

[7 : 03] These are the Christian white mice, and this is what's thought about them. They are involved in the quiet and unshakable conviction that among the peoples of the world, we are morally and ethically superior and have learned to acquire wealth in a moral and ethical way.

That's the Christian sort of cave. Then if you look at institutional Islam, it has discovered how God wants his world to be run, and they are out to run it for him.

And then if you look at institutional Judaism, they have established a great tradition of wisdom, and they are able to outsmart most people, and to acquire most of the wealth and most of the knowledge in the world, and not without arousing some resentment.

Institutional Hinduism sees religion as having unlimited possibilities, and assuming unlimited different gods to accommodate all those different possibilities.

And if you look at institutional Buddhism, it has a unique approach which starts with the very practical problem of human suffering.

[8 : 36] And it seeks to eliminate the consciousness of suffering by transcending individual consciousness.

We achieve that with drugs and alcohol, but it's probably not the best way. Well, those are the forms of institutional religion, and institutional religion invariably seeks to create out of their convictions a manageable idol that they can worship, because they are largely idolatrous.

Now, in the world in which I was born, which was a long time ago, but Harper's Magazine said that most of the problems of this time emerged from the 50s of the last century.

And I went to school, to university, got married, was ordained, went to my first church, all those things. So, all that's wrong with the world started with the 50s, and I was there when it happened. And I didn't know it was happening. As I suspect, most of us don't know what is happening right now in our world.

[10 : 04] In the world in which I lived in those days, institutional Christianity, our religion consisted largely in Protestants proving the Catholics were wrong, and Baptists proving they both were wrong, and the Brethren proving they were all wrong, and the United Church coming along and saying, let's pretend we're all right and carry on from there.

Well, that was the 50s. But the difficulty now is that instead of playing Christianity, Catholics versus Protestants, etc., we now are in the world of world religions.

And we have to decide that we have decided, I mean, coming into the world of world religions, there is a transcendent religion which has forsaken God, which is totally secular, and which is wiser than all of the religions put together.

It's represented by the CBC. I heard the CBC say that the Bible represents the basis of the whole understanding of humanity.

But they then were careful not to align themselves with that opinion, as they are good at it. I mean, that's what the media has to do these days. So what happens, you see, is that we have assumed in our new secular religion, which is outside of the religions, that we are, in fact, morally superior, like the Christians.

[12 : 04] We decide, like the Muslims, how the world should be run. Like the Jews, we assume that we're the only people smart enough to do it.

Like the Hindus, because everybody is wrong, so everybody is right. And like the Buddhists, our heart's cry is, let me out of here.

That's the way we think. And it was, the intriguing thing about this is dates.

And if you go back to the Buddha, and go back to the founding of Hinduism, you get back to the 7th century BC.

And when you get back to the 7th century BC, the prophets of the Old Testament were saying some quite remarkable things. Remember, this is the 7th century BC, when the kingdom of David and Solomon, the great kingdom, which is in a sense the prototype, I think, of the kingdom of heaven, had all gone wrong.

[13 : 22] Micah, who lived just before 700 BC, he said, you see, he didn't have this confusion about many gods. He said, what does the Lord, our God, require of us?

And he said at that point, what he requires is that we do justice, we love mercy, and we walk humbly with God. Not just one of them, but all three of them together. Justice, mercy, and walking humbly with God. Hosea came along, and he wanted to explain to the people what their relationship was to the God in whom they professed to believe. And the way he said it to them was by picking up a well-known prostitute from the public square and publicly marrying her. And saying, this is the predicament that God is in. That his people to whom he has committed himself have prostituted themselves. And then along comes Isaiah. [14:38] And Isaiah told them about the God they had forsaken. They thought themselves to be the servants of God.

So Isaiah told them exactly what the servant of God looked like. And what he did. And how they would recognize this servant in the particular chaos of their times. And that's where we come to Isaiah chapter 42. And chapter 42 is an eloquent, eloquent statement. I mean, it's beautifully written. And it talks about a new song which Terry has put us through today that we get the idea of something brand new that's happening. And the reason something brand new is happening is because the God whom we worship is not the God of the infinite future to whom we are hoping to go. [15:48] Nor is he the God of the past when everything worked. But he's the God of right now who is bringing new things to pass and giving us reason to sing a new song in his praise.

So in this amazing statement of Isaiah 42, 1-12 you find out something about how this all works. Well, let me tell you about it. If you look carefully you'll see who the God is who is speaking. And look at verses 5 and 6. In verse 5 the Lord is introduced. Thus says the God, the Lord the one who created the heavens and stretched them out who spread forth the earth and what comes from it who gives breath to the people upon it and spirit to those who walk in it. [16:59] So it is that God who stretched out the heavens created the earth brought forth life given breath to it and given spirit to it. That's the God of whom we are speaking.

And then it goes on that God speaks for himself in verse 6 if you look at it. When he says I am the Lord I have called you in righteousness I have taken you by the hand I have kept you I have given you as a covenant to the people I have given you as a light to the nations. And then he goes on to describe his work among the people of this creation. The people of the whole world.

So that if you ask the next question you find out to whom he is speaking. And he is speaking in verse 1 to the nations to all the earth. He is going to speak to the remote coastlands and the response to this is going to come from the furthest parts of the world that they will all join together in offering to him praise.

[18:22] So he is speaking to everybody. And of course that is why we celebrate the epiphany because the epiphany is making known the good news of Jesus Christ to the whole world.

not just to a little sect here and a little sect there but God's purpose is to bring forth justice to the whole world that it will permeate the whole world.

And then he goes on to become more specific about the one of whom he is speaking. And the Lord is saying behold my servant.

You know in our world of multitudes of religions and religious ideas and religious philosophies and do-gooders of all kinds he said my servant the one who does my will and fulfills my purpose he is mine I uphold him I choose him I indwell him by my spirit you'll see that in verse 1 my servant is not a terrorist exactly for in fact he does not in verses 3 and 4 he does not shout in the street he does not lift up his voice he does not break a bruised reed he does not quench a dim wick he does never he does not fail or become discouraged and that is the nature of my servant and what is he to do he's to do my will for the whole of the world and what is my will for the whole of the world my will is to bring forth justice the justice is to be established now you can ask well what is justice I mean you know we live in a world where justice is brought about by the lawyer who's paid the most it's being cynical but there is a great confusion around what justice is and justice is basically it is the contest between the living God and the religious idols that we put up against him the things that we want to believe in the things over which we have control justice is the majesty of the living God over against the idolatry of human beings it's portrayed in a court setting in briefly it is the

revealed truth of the living God in other words

[21 : 37] God's revealing of himself is what brings justice it brings it to the tiniest corner and the simplest transaction of the whole world and yet it brings it between the nations and the great powers the servant of the Lord is the one who both defines justice and ultimately will bring it to pass and what does justice bringing justice involve well I'll be quick and quit what it involves to take people by the hand verse six to establish a covenant and then look at these to open the eyes of the blind to bring prisoners out of the dungeon and to release those who sit in darkness now in order to understand that you must immediately start to interpret the reality which you have in your life that you are in some ways in a dungeon you are some ways blind you are some ways sitting in the darkness and the servant of the

Lord is not one who puts you further into the dungeon locks your prison more tightly and turns out all the lights that's the way we feel in our world today the dungeon is getting deeper the locks are getting harder to break and we are immersed in the existential quagmire of a life that has lost meaning because we have forsaken God and we fear he may have forsaken us well then he inversed and then the next thing you want to see there is the exclusive reality of the living God he's not one of the gods we have made in our image but he is the living God in whose image we are made he is the one who says my name is I am I am the source of being I am the source of righteousness and my glory is not shared praise belongs to me alone and there are to be no substitutes he is the God who brought the former things to pass he is the God who declares the new things he is the God who announces what belongs to the future this is the God into whose light we are to be brought by the servant of God and it's because of that that we are and you can be careful to look at it you see in verse 10 our response to the activity of the servant of God is not to hold a conference to discuss our differences but to sing to the Lord the living God a new song and it describes it the praises from the ends of the earth it's almost the sea is the percussion section the furthest points on earth carry the melody the gentile cities of the desert bring on the harmony the wandering Bedouins sing the descant there are soloists on the top of Grouse Mountain Seymour Mount Baker the

Swiss Alps they're yodeling and Mount Everest and the whole world is is not to usurp glory from God and to put it on ourselves the whole world's business is to give glory to God you think that's hard work to get to terms with all that well I'll tell you how to do it read John chapter 4 which was read for you this morning because God in Christ takes the woman of Samaria and brings her out of her dungeon out of her prison into the light and even when at the last moment she says yes that's the wonderful thing that is sometime going to happen when the Messiah comes that will happen and it's then that Jesus says to her as I believe he says now to you and me he said to her when she said

I'm looking for the Messiah he said using the name of God he said I am the most amazing thing so that all that's promised in the song in Isaiah 42 is to be realized in the wonderful way as shown by the woman of Samaria in her encounter with Jesus at the well please think about it and please remember that the God whom you're dealing with is not the God of the future or the God of the past or the God of the institution or the God of religion he is the living God and apart from you being brought to life you can't know the living God and he it is that brings you to life amen this digital audio file along with many others is available from the

[27 : 55] St. John's Shaughnessy website at www.stjohns-shaughnessy.org that address is www.stjohns-s-h-a-u-g-h-n-e-s-s-y-dot-o-r-g on the website you will also find information about ministries worship services and special events at St.

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