

ADDRESS AT TRINITY CHURCH
NEWPORT, RHODE ISLAND
ON THE OCCASION OF RHODE ISLAND INDEPENDENCE SUNDAY
7 MAY 1978
VICE ADMIRAL JAMES BOND STOCKDALE, U.S. NAVY

I am always curious as I sit in a pew and watch a military man in uniform take the pulpit at one of these patriotic worship services. What is he going to say? Is he going to attempt some acrobatics of logic and come down with one foot in the camp of preparedness and the other in the camp of pacifism? Is he going to suggest that no matter what, "God is on our side"? (An argument that has always seemed to me to be at least poor sportsmanship, if not in poor taste.)

So today I'm going to play it safe - safe and smart. Safe by staying out of modern politics, referring to nothing that's been written within the last 100 years, and smart by using material that I needed to review anyway, in preparation for the philosophy course I'm going to teach this fall: Foundations of Moral Obligation.

So I'm going to stick to abstractions - the abstraction of human freedom. That seems appropriate. Today's Trinity Tower devotes its front page to it. Revolutionary Rhode Islanders lived for it. Moreover, for this church service, my material deals with Christ's conception of it.

Ex-prisoners, if you will notice, seem to be obsessed with human freedom. Many of you have probably read Viktor Frankl's book Man's Search for Meaning in which he describes his fate in a German concentration camp. He could continue resistance as long as he remembered that he, alone, was in possession of the fundamental freedom of shaping his own attitude about what was going on.

This morning I'm going to refer to the writings of another ex-prisoner - Fyodor Mikhailovich Dostoyevsky. A little background: Dostoyevsky was born in Moscow in 1821 of an aristocratic father and a bourgeois mother who died when he was 16. He was brought up by his father, a doctor, known to be miserly, greedy, and corrupt. The young man, educated as an engineer, entered the Czar's army as an officer and although hardly a radical by nature, had by the age of 28 got himself arrested, court-martialed and sentenced to death for conspiracy.

After 8 months in a high security Moscow prison, he was taken into the courtyard one morning, and blindfolded before a firing squad. At the last minute, in a real life drama, the Czar's messenger rode up on horseback with a reprieve. The conditions of the reprieve were rather severe. Instead of being

shot, he was to have 4 years in irons in a Siberian prison, plus an additional 8 years in exile from Moscow as a private soldier in a Siberian regiment. He paid his penance without bitterness. After the twelve years he returned to Moscow, became first a magazine writer, then a novelist, and now generally enjoys the reputation of being a Christian philosopher - a very orthodox, Eastern church Christian.

Now it's important that all here be aware of Dostoyevsky's legitimacy in scholarship, because the story I'm going to tell is scary and bizarre. Like many great novelists he comes across with an artful meld of overstatement, exaggeration and subtlety. It's an impressionistic story that means different things to different people - and thus I rather carefully read my remarks, and suggest that if I miss the point for you, you later read the story yourself.

What I'm talking about is really a story within a story. The book from which it comes was written when Dostoyevsky was 58, about a 100 years ago, and it's titled The Brothers Karamazov. The Brothers, as it is called in the philosophy trade, is the story of sons killing their detested father. (Perhaps Father Dostoyevsky was the model.) Don't cringe - that's not an unusual tragic theme. Sigmund Freud has classified The Brothers as one of the three greatest tragedies ever written, in the same league with Shakespeare's Hamlet and Sophocles' Oedipus Rex - and all three deal with parricide.

The story within the story about human freedom is told by one of the Karamazov brothers to another. It is told by the second son, Ivan, whom I would classify as a cynic, to his youngest brother, Alyosha, who like the author in his earlier days, was a novice in a monastery. (Alyosha was the name of Dostoyevsky's first son, who died at the age of 3.)

Both brothers agree that the story is a fantasy. The two characters are Christ and a 90-year-old Cardinal, known as the Grand Inquisitor. This fantasy took place during the Spanish Inquisition, when, so the story goes, one morning in Seville, after burning several heretics at the stake, the Cardinal notices a crowd coming up the street and recognizes the man about whom they are clustered as Christ. To get right to the point, the Cardinal after seeing Christ perform healing miracles, decides he must be executed to save the Church.

Before you jump to conclusions, there's a couple of very important points to understand about this fantasy. First, it was Christ. It was not a case of mistaken identity and the Cardinal knew it was Christ. Second, the Cardinal was not a clerical bureaucrat or empire builder. He was too old to be ambitious to gain stature in the hierarchy of the Church, and almost too old to be vain. He is quite sympathetically portrayed as a clergyman

who believed that mankind is best served, not so much by seeking the bread of heaven, as by being furnished the bread of earth, social services, and so on - of being protected from want and the ravages of war. The best way to serve man, the Cardinal might say, is to protect him from himself.

For after a lifetime of thought, and a lifetime of study of the fate of mankind in the 15 centuries since the resurrection, the Cardinal thought that Christ had failed to take advantage of the position God had given him on earth. As he later told him, "Thou didst reject the one infallible banner which was offered Thee to make all men bow down to Thee alone." Of course, he's referring to Christ's refusal to accept the three temptations of Satan described by Matthew and Luke. He thought Christ was shortsighted and understood neither human nature nor the implications of Satan's three offers. I quote the Cardinal again: "In those three questions the whole subsequent history of mankind is, as it were, brought together in one whole and in them are all the unsolved contradictions of human nature." In summary, the clergyman was convinced that Christ, in his commitment to human freedom, in his insistence that man find his own way through the earthly maze of Good and Evil, had doomed man to self destruction.

Specifically, Christ refused to turn stones into bread and said, "Man does not live by bread alone." The Cardinal thought that by this Christ had set his standards for mankind too high, that he had foregone the opportunity to provide ample goods and services in the name of God, that he had unwittingly caused the formation of an elite group - the select who could meet his high moral standards, thereby accentuating nature's uneven distribution of human excellence - and that this in turn had spawned religious wars and so on.

The second temptation, you will remember, was Christ's refusal to demonstrate his immortality by surviving a plunge off the pinnacle. "Thou shalt not tempt the Lord thy God." By this, the Cardinal thought that Christ had passed up his chance to offer mankind that miracle, that mystery, that authority which mortals so crave. In fact, he suggests that if man does not have "miracles, mysteries and authority," he will invent them.

Throughout, with highly symbolic allusions, Dostoyevsky almost foretells the arrival of Hitler (an invented miracle), Lenin (who claimed to know what man really needed) and world federalists of various stripes - for the third temptation, as you will recall, came when Satan took Christ to a high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and said, "All these things will I give thee if thou wilt fall down and worship me."

Of course Christ refused and in the Cardinal's view thereby lost his opportunity to stop war by establishing a community of nations under his banner. For, as Dostoyevsky has his Cardinal say, "It is to mankind's advantage to live all in one unanimous, harmonious antheap of universal unity."

(The real Dostoyevsky seems to me to occasionally creep out in the prose in spite of himself.)

The Grand Inquisitor was tough. When he saw Christ raise a girl from the dead he had immediately told the guards to take Him to prison. And the next day he interrogated Him (although that may be the wrong word because Christ remained silent throughout). "Why did Thee come to hinder us?" asked the Cardinal. "Fifteen centuries ago Thou said 'I will make men free' and Thou thereby imposed an intolerable burden on men, and now they lay this freedom at our priests' feet with relief." As if economic burdens were not enough, the Cardinal claimed Christ had imposed an even greater burden - a moral burden. "Nothing has brought mankind more suffering than freedom of conscience. Didst Thou forget that man prefers peace, even death, to freedom of choice in the knowledge of good and evil?" The Cardinal makes the point that humans are by nature rebellious and even criticizes God when he says, "He who created these rebellious humans must have meant to mock them." This Grand Inquisitor goes on to describe the awfulness of men left to their own devices: "They will cast down temples and drench the earth with blood."

And then enraged by Christ's silence, he continued, "Why dost Thou look silently and searchingly at me with Thy mild eyes? Be angry, I don't want Thy love for I love Thee not. And what use is it for me to hide anything from Thee? Do I not know to whom I am speaking?"

The younger Karamazov brother was incensed at such a story, as might well you be. The novice Alyosha declared: "You are merely telling me a story of a man who does not believe in God." He railed at his older brother, and asked with contempt, "How does it end?"

And Ivan replied, "When the Inquisitor ceased speaking he waited some time for his prisoner to answer him. The old man longed for Him to say something, however bitter and terrible. But suddenly Christ approached the old man in silence and softly kissed him on his bloodless, aged lips - that was all his answer. The old man shuddered, his lips moved, he went to the door, opened it and said to Christ, 'Go and come no more' and then let Him out into the dark alley of the town. The prisoner went away."

"And the old man?" asked Alyosha. Ivan replied, "The kiss glows in his heart, but the old man adheres to his idea."

Rather an odd story, as ex-prisoners are wont to tell on occasion. And like the stories of T.E. Lawrence (Seven Pillars of Wisdom), and of several of us other ex-prisoners, it is subject to interpretation. I've already tipped my hand on how I interpret this one, as I presumed Dostoyevsky tipped his hand with his use of the word "antheap." Another telltale word is "clever," because at least twice the Cardinal refers to himself as one who has forsaken Christ and joined the other, "more clever" people. In one of his last punch lines the Grand Inquisitor admonishes Christ by saying: "Thou didst lift men up and taught them to be proud. We, however, shall show them that they are weak and that they are only children. But we'll explain how we will make them happy and that childlike happiness is sweetest of all."

Today, we celebrate the memory of some Rhode Islanders who 202 years ago certainly did not come down on the side of the "childlike happiness" of serving even a benevolent master. They were free, self-determining souls in the true sense of the word - proud, brave, passionate, some cruel, some acquisitive, many generous, almost all conscience ridden (as only Protestant New Englanders can be), and all obsessed with independence and freedom - bearing all those burdens of which the Grand Inquisitor would have relieved them. Rhode Islanders above all other ex-colonials were scarcely shy of accepting the obligation of seeking their own resolution of the problems of good and evil. Each was dedicated to finding his own way to God. And they knew there was a price for that pride and that freedom and that independence - and periodically it has been paid in blood. But who wants to live in an antheap?

In early May of 1776 Rhode Island declared for liberty. Fourteen years later in May of 1790 they committed themselves to the common pursuit of liberty with the other 12 colonies by signing a Constitution whose preamble states as its purpose, "To establish justice, to ensure domestic tranquility, to provide for the common defense, and to promote the general welfare." And I am one who believes that the order in which our Founding Fathers chose to list those purposes, that is, justice first, domestic tranquility second, defense third, and welfare fourth, was intentional.