

"What shall we tell the children?"

was the anguished plea of one mother in a Cape Cod church worship last evening. Did she mean (1) she hasn't been telling the children anything about ultimates (death, God, afterlife, evil)? or (2) she thinks that now she should tell them something different from what she's been telling them? She asked her question last night in a Cape Cod church other than the one Loree & I were praying in, so I couldn't rejoin "What have you been telling your children?"--but probably wouldn't have, as her question was probably more expostulatory ("rhetorical") than interrogative.

And this morning I've been getting phonecalls from pastors saying, in effect, "What shall I tell my people?" & "What scriptures would you suggest?" Some of what I've been saying to them is in this Thinksheet.

1 WHERE WERE YOU WHEN...OCCURRED?

° Pearl Harbor I--I'd just returned from worship leadership in the Chicago church of which I was assistant pastor (before the days when "assistant" was not used in titles, as supposedly demeaning & thus an infringement on human dignity), & my African-American neighbor came over to tell me.

° JFK's assassination--Our family were listening to the radio while laying tile in our Chappaqua (NY) basement.

° Pearl Harbor II--I'd just returned, yesterday morning, from having blood drawn, & a Craigville neighbor phoned to ask Loree (chair of our church's shepherd program) to activate the shepherds to activate their sheep to come to the church at 6pm. How come, when something awful happens, people don't move further away from the putatively ineffectual "good" God, but move instead toward Him & church? When the American bombers were coming, 1,000 people of Salzburg (Austria) crowded into the church, just in time for all to die: one of our bombs. Long afterward, in the gorgeous church built on the site (to the old specs), Loree & I knelt in solemn silence.

(On the outside chance that somebody, in future, might read this, I should add that "Pearl Harbor II" is an analogy of the disintegration of the World Trade Center twin towers & of a section of the Pentagon--both by commercial planes used as missiles by hijackers.)

2 Now let's broaden the question underlined in my intro to this Thinksheet, thus: What have the children been told? The culture has told them (as it did us before them) that sense (of life/world/cosmos/history) can be made **atheistically**, religion & God being optional addenda, add-ons. Not even an add-on in the Fall/Winter/01 special edition of NEWSWEEK that arrived today: it asks you to think of nothing but yourself, & about yourself nothing other than your health, & it nowhere suggests that religion/God might be a resource. Prayer? Muslim readers, if faithful, pray 5x daily; but (according to this NW edition) senselessly: God/religion are not health-resources. But (p26) these might help: "stress reduction, meditating, or yoga." Strong evidence that among Americans, both private & public prayer are surging. How come NW hasn't yet gotten the news? Are the editors unconsciously atheist (from growing up in an atheist culture [i.e., a culture whose public schools & media make godless sense, i.e., sense sans God]), or deliberately so (so as not to irritate the cultural elite)?

Well, what were the schools telling the children today about what happened yesterday? A pastor was almost spitting mad when her daughter got home, trembling. The child had been told "This is only the begining [of attacks on the U.S.]." If the children get too nervous, the system will call in "crisis counselors" instruct--(as though they needed it!) not to use religion/God in efforts at tension-reduction (stress management).

3 After five days of public school, the child (a rare one, in America today: Sunday morning is for the new religion, [school-sponsored] sports) goes to Sunday school & perhaps hears what a New York woman, gazing yesterday at the 100-foot-high Trade Towers detritus, said: "When a nation decides to turn from God, this is what happens." Would you say that? Does it make sense to you? If so, how would you help a child to make sense of it?

4 I just saw/heard the U.S. Congress Prayer Vigil in the Rotunda. An African-American Capitol policeman sang "Amazing Grace" (all the more effective because unpolished voice, full heart). The House chaplain (RCC) read from Rev., "I make all things new." The Senate chaplain, Ps.46 (message: "God is in charge"): "Help us keep our hearts on you. You are our Lord and our Savior. Amen."

In my collect per day, today I came upon this (by Wm. Bright, 1824; in the U.S. Book of Common Prayer), so appropriate now: "O GOD, by whom the meek are guided in judgment, and light riseth up in darkness for the godly: Grant us, in all our doubts and uncertainties, the grace to ask what thou wouldst have us to do, that the spirit of wisdom may save us from all false choices, and that in thy light we may see light, and in thy straight path may not stumble; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen."

So now, there's something to tell the children: When in doubt, PRAY; when in trouble, PRAY; when in sorrow, PRAY; when you don't know what to do, PRAY that God will guide you and show you the way. Yes, & PRAY at all other times!

5 Yes, & with the child in your arms, speak of life's fragility & limit: speak of death as walking into the arms of God. Older children, seeing lower Manhattan dust-covered, can be helped to face "dust to dust" as what happens to everybody, including the highly successful such as were in the Trade Towers & the destroyed section of the Pentagon: "Golden lads and girls all must, / As chimney-sweepers, come to dust....come to dust....come to dust." (Shakespeare, "Cymbeline," 4.2.266-280; & death scenes in great children's literature).

6 Children can be preprotected against **idolatries**, including nationalism. It's clear now that the terrorists intended to destroy the White House, & an uprising on that plane led to its crashing instead into a field. The targets were three symbols of American power: political (the White House), military (the Pentagon), & financial (the Trade Towers). IRONY: As power increases, so does vulnerability. "How are the mighty fallen!" (2Sam.1.19,25,27).

7 Children can be protected against **overprotection**. Since "the [black liberation] Movement" a half-century ago, Americans have known little social unrest such as has torn scores of "them," other peoples. Today, Geo. Will put the change in what will be a classic phrase: Since the fall of the Berlin wall, we Americans have had "a decade-long holiday from history." In teaching the Lord's Prayer, we can more easily now explain "*Your* kingdom come."

8 And we can take this horrendous occasion to tell the children about the **church** in the history & present of human suffering. At 5pm yesterday I got a phonecall from a church on 6th St., just a few blocks from the Trade Towers complex. The friend calling me was helping with the 100 wounded that had converted the church, by its invitation, into a temporary hospital--as happened in our Revolutionary War & our Civil War in churches near battlefields. (My friend did not say "injured": people are injured in accidents but wounded in war.)

9 THEODICY: We should be telling the children--especially by stories such as "Narnia"--that God loves us enough to give us freedom to choose between right & wrong, good & evil. He is eager to help us choose right & good, but sometimes we choose unwisely, & suffer, & cause suffering in others--other people, & other creatures of God. In his Son Jesus, God came to suffer with us & for us, to save us from sin, from choosing unwisely. In the Lord's Prayer, we ask our heavenly Father to protect us from evil we ourselves are tempted to do, & from others' evil. And God the Holy Spirit is always with us to help us praise & thank God, ask forgiveness for our failures to do his will, witness to God's good news through Jesus Christ as Lord & Savior, & work for justice & peace.

PROBLEM: All those technical terms of the Christian Language? Yes, learned gradually--as one learns any language. And by conversation, the best way to learn any language.

10 Help the children participate in ritual acts of good against evil, as the candles in every American frontdoor last evening (9.14.01)--affirming flames as a backfire against destroying flames. "Telling" them should not be in words only.