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Dear Friends,

Real life Not long ago I heard a talk by a man whose career included a fair amount of research into the development of the brain and the complicated relationship between its physiology and personality. He suggested the Greeks summarized it most succinctly: people are either disciples of Plato—and focus on ideas, ideals, abstractions, and concepts, or else they are disciples of Aristotle, believing that what matters most is what is tangible, material, practical, and useful. In somewhat oversimplified terms, for the Platonist, “real” life is not so much what we see as what can, or at least, could be. And for the Aristotelian “real” life is what we can count, weigh, touch, measure, make, sell, and buy. This speaker traced those differences to different circumstances in which the brain developed in an embryo, so that one’s world view was basically a function of brain chemistry. I’m guessing he was an Aristotelian.

Jesus among the Greeks...and the Americans As I listened to this presentation, I found myself thinking about Jesus, and the Christian understanding that he is “the Word made Flesh.” Jesus’ incarnation challenges Christians to view the spirit and the material not so much as diametric opposites but rather as two realms which, though distinct, are intended to be intimately related.

If “real” to you means “concrete” (as in, “Come on, let’s get real...”), you may well be an Aristotelian. I suspect that most of us have been educated and brought up to be Aristotelian, especially in America where we pride ourselves on being practical, no-nonsense problem solvers.

But the danger is that we might begin to identify what works with what is good. And, further, our conception of what “works” can be shaped by short-term quantifiable results. When we try to define what makes a good life, we try to come up with things we can count— income, life expectancy, various measurable medical indices, literacy rates and education rates, and so on. It is not that these do not matter, but putting them all together still falls dramatically short of describing a good life.

We have become used to thinking that our self is defined by our mind. But the brain which hosts our mind, like any other organ, is subject to decay, and may not be the last organ to fail. We still

have identity, we are still ourselves, even when our mind is significantly compromised by the ravages of disease, decay, and sometimes simply by age.

Rebalancing the portfolio Traditionally, we talk about this identity as our “soul.” I wonder if while we are focusing on our, and each other’s, minds, God is focusing on our soul. And perhaps we would do better, and be better equipped for what life will throw at us, if we would diversify our identity portfolio a bit and divide our assets more evenly between “mind” and “soul.”

We know a lot about how to nurture the development of the mind. In the last few hundred years we did not abolish Established Religion, we just changed it: we do not have a national Church, but we have a national orthodoxy of salvation by education, and education along specifically defined lines. We require people to go to school, we tax everyone to support it, we worry if people do badly in school, and if they drop or flunk out we worry deeply about their prospects. This seems to me to be remarkably similar to the behavior and mindset of medieval Europe with just the names and categories changed. To question the value of our style of education is to be a heretic about the faith of our community, and in some ways that seems as risky now as it was then.

Real Life Focusing on what we can measure and count has prompted us to think that this life is the only life, and our greatest good is pursued by doing whatever we can, at whatever cost, to add to the number of our days.

I sometimes wonder if life might be like a sermon—longer isn’t always better.

The purpose of a sermon is to open up the scriptures of the day and help us each to experience what those scriptures contain so that we might hear what God has to say to each of us.¹ The sermon seeks to connect the realm of God with our daily lives. Perhaps the entire experience of coming to church is to recapitulate that “word becoming flesh.” We bring together the ideal world of God and the material world with which we are so familiar and remind ourselves that they are both of God and belong together in harmonious relationship.

Throughout the Gospels Jesus does astounding works in the material world. He heals, he feeds, he touches. The crowds want more of that. More healing, more bread, more miracles. And Jesus makes another choice. He does not come to turn stones into bread, to take over the government, or to become a dazzling celebrity in terms which make sense to us (Luke 4:1-13). Neither does he sit detached from the world issuing cryptic oracular teachings. Jesus is the Word and the Flesh come together in one person.

And that combination is perplexing, challenging, and often seemingly contradictory. We seek to relieve that tension and our anxiety by choosing one realm or the other: “Our real work is to make material life better: soup kitchens, housing, and [physical] health care”, or, “Our real work is spiritual: worship, personal spiritual growth, and strengthening spiritual communities.”

Perhaps we each lean one way or the other, secretly, or openly arguing for the reality of the material or of the spiritual. But the example of Jesus is that God’s intent is that we strive to hold on to both, as difficult, frustrating, or even counter-intuitive as that might be. Richard Hooker, the illustrious

¹ I am often struck by what different things different people will hear and take away from the same sermon, and by people remembering something which was important to them which I thought of little importance when I included it. Perhaps a good preacher resembles an accomplished waiter—someone who can deliver the food efficiently and gracefully but remembers that the point is the food, not the flourish.

Elizabethan Anglican theologian, is famously described as advocating not compromise for the sake of peace, but comprehension for the sake of truth. We don't give each party a little of what they want to try to keep everybody happy. Instead, we acknowledge that they each have something that God has given us for our health and our salvation, and we, and the world, need them both. Consequently we work to hold together in a single unity the material and the spiritual which it would be so temptingly easy to divide.

Contradiction, paradox, and mystery are at the heart of the Christian faith. As one educated as an Aristotelian, I wish that were not so, and I often try to resolve everything so it fits more neatly together. I like things to make sense on my terms. My sense is that any account of the Christian faith which is neat and orderly has probably not done full justice to its complexity. We are left with things which we believe to be true but which we cannot fully explain in our own terms. Perhaps part of being a Christian is the ability, or at least the openness, to believe that something can be true, can be real, even if we do not understand it and cannot reduce it to something which can be seen, touched, weighed, measured, counted, or replicated in controlled conditions.

Christmas and Easter in June Christmas (God coming to us as a human baby) and Easter (a dead man appearing again alive, but not just a resuscitated corpse), two of the pillars of the Christian faith, are examples of that paradox and mystery: they defy both explanation and understanding. The Trinity, which we celebrate at the beginning of every summer on the Sunday after Pentecost, is another example: We believe in one God, but in three persons. God the "Father" is not more "God" than God the "Son," and neither are more, or less, "God" than God the Holy Spirit. They are not three Gods—they do not have three different personalities or agendas—the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are all equally committed to creation, judgment and justice, to teaching, feeding, and healing, to redemption, to comfort, and to lively exuberance. They are one God in three persons.

We have four gospels but one Gospel: Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John disagree. We do not throw out the parts we do not like or decide are wrong or think reflect only the agenda of an author or that author's community. We read all versions, acknowledge what we find puzzling, but look, in the midst of things that we do not understand, for the hand and the word of God. What might God intend for us to take away from John placing the Last Supper on a different day from the other gospels. Instead of using our intellectual tools to fix the gospels, perhaps the issues in and between the gospels shed interesting, and perhaps even corrective, light on the nature of our tools, the faith we put in them, and what we believe our relationship to be to the texts.

What comes next From now until December we will be in the season of Pentecost. We are leaving for six months the intensity of Advent, Christmas, Epiphany, Lent, Easter, and the Day of Pentecost. The Roman Church calls this "Ordinary Time." This is the season when we spend time, ordinary time, with the complexities of the Christian faith. Week in and week out we hear the stories; we settle in to the familiar tales and puzzle over the hard sayings. We may seek to understand, but more than that we just spend time with what we hear.

And, if we spend the time, week in and week out, the stories, the teachings, the principles, even the paradoxes and the contradictions become part of who we are; they become real to us by a means deeper, and more mysterious, than understanding. Our souls—that portion of our identity deeper than our minds created and known by God—are fed and shaped by being in the presence of God, presented in the means that God gave us for this purpose, the Word and the Sacraments.

We operate on a different rhythm in the summer; much of the busyness of the rest of the year is hushed in this season. I invite you to enter into this time with a hope for both rest and for growth

for your souls, that in this season you may dwell more fully in Christ and become more fully aware of how he already dwells in you.

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Rector