

# It's either Something or nothing.

*Sermon preached by the Rev. William McD. Tully, Rector,  
at the eleven o'clock service, October 16, 2011, The Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost.  
Based on Isaiah 45.1-7 and Matthew 22.15-22.*

One of the proudest claims of our religion—and the same pride extends to our spiritual ancestors in Judaism and our spiritual cousins in Islam—is that we're monotheists.

We're not pagans doing deals with a pantheon of gods. We know there is one God, and from that truth flows all truth, virtue and reality.

Except that it isn't quite true, however much we may wish it to be. And that means that life is a little unstable.

You only have to turn to the Bible to see how mixed the record is on monotheism. In fact, taken as a whole, the scriptures suggest that there really isn't such a thing in practice.

Monotheism, as any school kid knows, is the opposite of *polytheism*. It's the claim that there is one god alone, as opposed to many gods. It's also different from *henotheism*, a word created to claim that while there may be many gods, it's best to stick with just one of them.

And if you think about it, that approach is actually more common than pure monotheism.

"I am the Lord thy God . . . thou shalt have no other gods before me" (Ex 20.2-3; Dt 5. 6-7) is a *henotheistic* commandment, not a monotheistic one. In other words, there are other gods, but you should not have them. Stay with just one.

And here's when the claims and record get quite mixed: the heart of today's passage from Isaiah, from the part of that prophetic book written after the famous Cyrus' cylinder promulgated the return of the exiles from Babylon, we hear something like that idea of monotheism: "I am the Lord, there is no other" (Is 45.18). In other words, there just aren't any other gods, there is only one God.

Does that mean "one" as opposed to two or three or fifteen or thirty? Is life's dilemma and instability a numerical problem?

Well, not necessarily. There is another use of the word "one", which is not properly speaking a numerical use at all. This is where "one God" is opposed to "nothing." In other words, where *One* is more like the exclamation *is!* than it is like a number. The exclamation *is!* is opposed to *nothing there!*

So, if you're still with me, the number "one" is more like the other numbers that it is rubbing out than it is different from them. As the theologian James Alison perceptively writes:

"The 'one God' as opposed to 'nothing at all' is more like the 'nothing at all' that it is opposed to than it is to anything else. In other words, following this understanding of the *mono* in *monotheism*, God is much more like 'nothing at all' than like 'one of the gods.' "

As we say in that ancient Nicene Creed every Sunday, "We believe in one God . . . creator of all that *is*, seen and unseen" —a comprehensively radical claim if there ever was one.

Where religion seems to move progressively through the Bible is toward the claim that either believe in God the one God, or nothing.

James Alison calls monotheistic Judaism an act of genius because it's the realization that "one God" is much more like "no god at all" than like "one of the gods." He pushes further: "In other words . . . atheism, which is untrue, offers a *much less inadequate* picture of God than theism, which is true."

Theism—*mono*, *poly*, or *heno*—is inadequate. And the promoters of the commandments understood that. No idols! You can't make a picture of it, assign a name to it, or reduce it to your language or your numbers. God just *is*.

These magnificent words from Isaiah were addressed to the remnant of the Jews who had spent years in exile in Babylon. They carried two surprises, nearly incomprehensible and unbelievable surprises. First, they had a God who is One and everything that *is*. Second, their God's messiah—one they had been conditioned to expect would come from among their own, from the line of their king David— was in fact a powerful, and very human foreign ruler, "his anointed . . . Cyrus." (Is. 45.1)

The radical claim of the Bible is that although we have a very mixed record in our beliefs

and sorting out our beliefs, God is not only indefinable and untouchable, God works through the world we actually live in, through its processes, including the ones we would rather wash our hands of, and certainly including some unlikely people.

God can “make weal and create woe,” as the prophet put it. (Is. 45.7) And he does it through stuff you can see, you can experience and work with. And the progressive nature of biblical revelation is that as you go through time more and more people accept this.

Of course there are bound to be a few puritans on the premises, folks who need to have everything be so pure that everyone just believes in God and no one gets their hands dirty. That is evidently not the world Jesus lived in.

Matthew tells the story of how the religious types tried to trap him with a question. Flattering him as a sincere teacher, they asked if it was lawful to pay taxes to Caesar or not.

He held up a coin, made them acknowledge that it was stamped with the Emperor Caesar’s image, and said, “Give to Caesar what is Caesar’s and to God what is God’s.”

I don’t know what that means. I doubt that anyone who heard Jesus say it knew, either. It was a characteristic way of his: not giving an answer, but keeping people in the game. That’s the game of life, the religious quest, the quest Jesus seems to have been on, and the way of seeking that he opened up to anyone who could listen.

And that quest was: To come to the realization that there is either one God or there is nothing. I would say that we who call ourselves religious are hoping, at least, to find a way to live with that question. And because we don’t live alone, finding a way to do it and get along with others.

If your answer to life that there is Something, Some Purpose, then your further question is, *How do I live out that quest?*

Jesus said that the purpose of life is rooted in the purpose of creation: it’s love, full stop. It’s love God with all you have, all your heart, soul, mind and strength, and to live your neighbor as yourself.

And in the encounter with the religious types who questioned his teaching, he said the only way we can practice the love of God and neighbor is right where we live, in a world in which the big moves are often out of our hands, in which the purposeful acting out of the Creator’s love comes to us through Cyrus and Caesar.

Did he solve the riddle of monotheism? Hardly. Because Jesus is not in the riddle solving business. He leaves the work to us. He saves us from thinking that that there’s a magic savior.

Only those willing to accept the reality that God cohabits the world of action with the Cyruses and the Caesars—only those, I believe, have a chance of being saved, which means growing up, outgrowing silliness about God, and becoming fully alive and fully active in making a better world.

There’s an implied consciousness and savvy in the enigmatic reply Jesus gave about Caesar and God: Live in the world as you find it.

That consciousness is heard in a Muslim proverb:

*Trust in God but tie your camel.*

And in these two from Yiddish lore:

*If God lived on earth, people would break his windows.*

and

*To make God laugh at you, tell him your plans.*

And then there is the Jesus proverb:

*Render to God the things that are God’s and to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s.*

That’s Something. Not nothing.

---

©2011 St. Bartholomew’s Church in The City of New York.

For information about St. Bartholomew’s and its life of faith and mission at an important American crossroads, write us at [central@stbarts.org](mailto:central@stbarts.org), call 212/378-0222, or visit [stbarts.org](http://stbarts.org).  
325 Park Avenue at 51st Street, New York, New York 10022