

Lent 3.07

1. This Easter will mark the 52nd anniversary of the death of a French Jesuit named Teilhard de Chardin. I am not sure if he ever made the cover of Time Magazine, but in some circles he was very well-known, especially in the years immediately following his death, so in the 60s. During his lifetime Teilhard had been forbidden by Rome and his Jesuit superiors from publishing anything of a theological nature because they thought that his writings of this nature were an unsuccessful attempt to join theology and science. Theologians did not think what he wrote was good theology; scientists did not think what he wrote was good science. Yet Teilhard felt that he had to attempt to join these two different areas of human knowing because they were joined in him: he was both a believer and a scientist, both a priest and a scientist. Then, after his death, his lay friends began to publish his works and they became very popular.

2. Sometime we must read some of his writings together. It would be especially good for those of you who grew up speaking French. You could read him in the original language. But for our purposes right now let me just use one of his thoughts. Teilhard believed that we are wrapping the world in consciousness. People

sometimes say that there is no difference between us and people who lived a thousand or three thousand years ago. When we read what they wrote---the Old Testament, the plays of the Greek tragedians—we are at home. We understand them. They were, it is clear, people just like us. They loved and hated, they made war and peace, were rich and poor, sad and happy, God-fearing and non-God-fearing. So nothing is new under the sun. We and they are peas in a pod. We are not more clever, not more intelligent than they were. There is therefore no advance on the human level. Not true, says Teilhard. You are looking in the wrong place. The difference and the advance in the human race is not first of all on the individual level but on the social level. We have created new tools, and we are using these tools to increase the psychic temperature of the world. And that will and indeed is changing us, even as individuals. In fact, we are changing the universe. It is becoming conscious in and through us.

3. What would he say if he were alive today and saw the revolution that has taken place with computers and cell phones. I think he would say: I told you so! Our world is buzzing constantly. It has therefore become smaller, more united, and this forces us into closer contact with each other, and the result is a rise in the psychic temperature of our world, which then changes the way we think as

individuals as well. As a believer, Teilhard said that in the end this entire process will all be drawn together into one point of supreme energy, consciousness and love, and that is the risen Lord Jesus.

4. His vision is magnificent. It was his attempt to understand our Christian faith within the context of evolution. Teilhard would say: Jesus cannot be the center of the universe unless the universe is itself centralizing itself under his energy. And that is what we see happening before our eyes if only we had eyes to see it. That is what the technological revolution is doing.

5. Yes, it is a magnificent vision, but some question whether there is room in it for sin. All seems so positive in his vision. Teilhard does not seem to leave enough room for the negative side of human evolution, for its sinfulness. Perhaps for him sin is reduced simply to unsuccessful efforts on the individual and social level, mistakes which a world in progress makes, and perhaps has to make, to move forward, and God puts up with them as parents puts up with their children's mistakes.

6. Of course Teilhard would be on solid theological ground if he reminded his critics that Christian faith teaches that Jesus will triumph, that the Kingdom will come at the end of the world's

history, even though this victory is not yet complete and the skirmishing between good and evil continues. But in the end good will triumph.

7. And yet when we read the papers and look at the television, it is clear that all is not well, that we are not yet at the end, that we are still struggling and the forces of evil so often seem to prevail. Look at the evil of that factory situation in the New Bedford. Look at the war in Iraq where everyday more and more people are killed. Look at the genocide in Sudan. Look at the world-wide hatred of our country by much of the rest of the world because of the policies of the present administration. Look at the existence of slavery in the world, men, women and children in work situations which amount to slavery. All is not well. Teilhard's vision has to be tempered by the reality of the continuing struggle with evil in our world today.

8. And today's readings emphasize this negativity. Paul warns the Corinthian Christians: "Whoever thinks he is standing secure should take care not to fall." The Israelites in the desert fell, Paul tells them, even though God brought them through the sea and fed them everyday. So take care! And in our Gospel from Luke Jesus cites two recent tragedies, Pilate's slaughter of people while they were worshipping and people killed by a falling tower, and asks his

hearers: “Do you think these unfortunate people suffered in this way because they were greater sinners than you?” The answer he gives to his own question is that they were not. However, their deaths are a warning, he says: “But I tell you, if you do not repent, you will all perish as they did.”

9. But that is not the Lord’s last word in today’s Gospel. No, his last word is given in the little parable at the end of our Gospel for today. Here the owner of a garden wants to tear up a fig tree which has not produced fruit in three years, but his gardener says to him: Sir, give it one more year. I will fertilize it and the ground around it. If that doesn’t work, then you can cut it down.

10. Jesus is that gardener. He does not give up on us. He tries once again. So we are brought back to the positive, and that is the last note of our religion. There is always hope for all of us because Jesus keeps working with us. So perhaps in the end we have to say that Teilhard was right—at least ultimately. The end is victory. Meanwhile God will put up with our sinfulness and lack of repentance as parents put up with the foolishness of their children. But that does not excuse us from trying to move forward. No, be careful, Paul says, lest you fall.