Christian Education

A series of Sermons and Occasional Papers
From the clergy and members
of Holy Trinity Church
Forbes Park, Makati

Date: 28 May 2006

Title: **"Coming in from the Code."**

Comment: Insert Comment here

Author: The Rev. Tyler A. Strand

Readings for this Sunday:

First Reading   Acts 1:15-26

Second Reading   1 John 5:9-15

Gospel   John 17:11b-19

There was a film that came out about two years ago called "National Treasure." It starred Nicholas Gage and had to do with the secret treasure of Solomon's Temple, kept hidden and protected for a thousand years by the Templar Knights whose location is encoded in the Declaration of Independence. By the end of the move, the treasure has been recovered, buried under our own Trinity Episcopal Church in downtown Manhattan. Those in the know found this film very humorous since if the fabulous treasure were actually found beneath the church, it would have belonged to Trinity Wall Street, the which is already the richest parish in the world! I mention that film because it dealt with esoteric and secret societies, hidden codes and concealed treasure. And it was actually a better film than "The Da Vinci Code", the recent hit that is based on the publishing phenomenon written by Dan Brown.

Dan Brown's book presents nothing new. Everything in it can be found in books of the occult and the works of conspiracy theorists going back hundreds of years. What might be said is that this: they are a book and a film that speak to our times, and that is not meant as a complement. Thanks to them, people are invited to treat the divinity of Christ in the same way that they do U.F.O.'s and sightings of Elvis: something you can't prove and the subject of a huge conspiracy. It also gives the

people what they want: a popular, exciting, and easily digested response to traditional, challenging Christianity.

What does 'The Da Vinci Code' say that is so controversial? Simply stated, it is a fictionalized account of the discovery that most of what the Christian Church has taught about Jesus has been a cover-up. The "real story"? Well, it seems to be that Jesus was a regular human being who had a wife, Mary Magdalene, who was pregnant with his child at the time of the crucifixion. Mary and her baby fled Palestine and settled in France where she was the mother of a royal line that has continued, in secret, until the present day. But Mary Magdalene also represents to the "Da Vinci Codists" the "divine feminine" in a position of strength and equality, not like the Virgin Mary whom, it is said, the Catholic Church tried to use to cover up the Magdalene's original importance. The "true" Christian Faith, it is argued, had nothing to do with Jesus being God or a denial of the wholesomeness of sex and the family. It was suspiciously like what many contemporary Christians wish the Church were like: user friendly, affirming of everything, demanding no sacrifices or moral choices.

If this story had involved, say, Crown Prince Alexei Romanoff, son of the last Tsar, and we were being told that he had mysteriously survived execution and had children (which one recent work of fiction I read in fact is based on), no one would feel offended. But Mr. Brown insisted on trying out his theories against the Christian Faith, and he makes fiction sound like verifiable fact. That's not fair and it's misleading and it's playing on the religious beliefs of millions of Christians throughout the world.

The documents that Brown and his co-conspirators use are very old, it is true: some going back to the 2nd and 3rd centuries of the Christian era. But they are *not* as old as the Gospels themselves. Using them to say, "Aha, look! Here we have the *other* versions of Christianity that were *kept hidden* by the Church all these years!" is just not accurate. It would be as though an archeologist, digging in the ruins of Manila, were to find hidden copies of the Book of Mormon and the writings of Brother Manalo of the Iglesia ni Cristo (which actually sound quite a bit like Dan Brown's theory!). Imagine taking those works together and out of context to say, "These were equally valid Christian traditions in 2006, coming dangerously close to rivaling Traditional

Christianity. Somebody hid them to cover up the truth!" We know that's not true. And the Christian Church knows that what Brown says isn't true, either.

Another point to bear in mind is neither Brown, nor the film, admit that there are *more* traditions to Christianity than the Roman Catholic version. Central to his attacks is the famous Council of Nicaea that gave us our Nicene Creed that we recite every Sunday. Brown says that prior to that meeting, nobody really thought that Jesus was the Son of God. Instead, we are supposed to accept that the Emperor Constantine decided on this teaching and forced the Church to accept it as part of his plan to make the Vatican a source of religious power. The Eastern Orthodox Church accepts Nicaea, but it certainly isn't under the Pope. Our own Anglican Church accepts the ancient teachings about Jesus, but isn't being kept in the dark by evil cardinals in Rome. No, Brown has a deep resentment against the Roman Catholic Church, and he has let this affect the way he wrote his book. That book, in turn, has been made into a movie that says some really libelous things about not only the Roman Catholics, but about all true-believing Christians in the world. And it is so full of conspiracy theory, I am very surprised that it wasn't filmed by Oliver Stone!

Today is the Sunday after Ascension Day. As I had said already, the theme and the teaching of that feast day in the Church's calendar spills over into today's readings, prayers and hymns. If there is any day that celebrates the fallacy of 'The Da Vinci Code' it is this one, when we celebrate the return of our Lord Jesus Christ to the Father as Son and Co-Equal Person of the Trinity. Do not get hung up on images of Jesus flying into the air- that will only confuse you from the central teaching of the event: that Jesus was both exceptional human being, and also most wonderfully Son of God. That has been the witness of the Church from its earliest days. That has been the faith for which the martyrs gave their lives. The simple continuity of that belief is traced both in the New Testament books and also in the earliest documents of Church history, including those that are older than the ones Brown and Company want you to think have been hidden away.

As Anglicans, we aren't afraid of religious fiction. Anglican writers brought the world some wonderful fictional worlds, like those of C.S. Lewis. They express a wonderful

imagination, but they are fundamentally consistent with the ancient teachings of our Christian Faith. You are already familiar with the wonderful Christian parable of Narnia. If you want to discover the strange and wonderful world of Christian Science Fiction, read Lewis' "space trilogy" beginning with "Out of the Silent Planet." Our fiction teaches valuable lessons about following the example of Christ in what he taught in how he lived and in how he died and rose again for us. "The Da Vinci Code" says precious little about Jesus even as an historical person, preferring to concentrate on his supposed "wife", Mary Magdalene, who takes on mythic proportions as the embodiment of a feminine goddess. That isn't the way the story was first told by the earliest men and women who knew Jesus and what he did for the world.

So you can read Brown's book, and you can see Tom Hanks' movie, and you most likely won't come out of the cinema resolved never to come to Holy Trinity again. Because in here you will find the Faith of the Church of Jesus Christ as proclaimed for 2,000 years, as witnessed to by the blood of the martyrs, and as believed in by even more people than have read Dan Brown. But do your own homework: read Scripture and the accurate, earliest sources of our historic tradition and discover the inconsistencies of the attempts to put a completely different spin on it. It will be a rewarding experience…especially for those who have been stuck out in the "Code".