

Fourth Sunday of Easter (C)
Acts 9.26-43/Revelation 7.9-17/John 10.22-30
St. Paul's Church, Halifax
29 April 2007

“SUNDAY AND THE REST OF THE WEEK”

~Paul H. Friesen~

I saw an interesting sentence this week, on the way home from St. Paul's, late one afternoon. It read: 'There's no problem a good miracle can't solve.'¹ Now if you or I saw this on the inside of a greeting card we might forget it. In fact, if on it were added personal words from a person dear to us, about a problem unexpectedly solved, we might welcome it. But on an outdoor sign posted at the road side the claim can only be a vague statement of good will. Who would want to disagree? And what does it really mean?

At least, that's what I thought until I realized it was on a sign posted by the management of an auto repair shop. And then I thought: to begin a conversation about the condition of one's car with the word 'miracle' is a little frightening! And then I thought: Is this the way Christians are meant to go through life after Easter?

Are we hoping for convenient miracles to solve our day-to-day problems?

Easter was (and is) a miracle. In the midst of tragedy and death we confess that Jesus Christ triumphed over tragedy and death, taking the human race with him. We confess the promise of the forgiveness of sin, and life beyond the grave, and the re-creation of the universe into the image in which it was first made by our creator.

And sometimes, in the mercy of God, without any human hope left, diseases leave our bodies, people forgive each other for no apparent (or any good) reason, and human tragedies are avoided in the nick of time. How can we help but feel grateful!

But do we really confess as Christians that, when human problems arise, we ought to be surprised and then ought to expect a miracle from the blue? When we pray for our own difficulties and our neighbours' problems and for tragedies in far off lands, do we expect God to solve the problems without human involvement, without the divine solution arising in our hearts, through our heads and by means of our hands?

¹ The sign sits in the lot of the *Petro Canada* Station at the corner of Oxford and Quinpool.

The Scriptures tell us two stories this morning, one set in heaven, and the other on earth. One talks about the future, the other speaks about the present. One talks about what we confess, the other talks about what we live. And so together these stories invite us to live this coming week of our life, the first week of May, 2007, between the living memory of Easter, and the promise of a resurrected, a re-created universe.

The story from the book of Acts, the story that will look like our own lives this week, is the story that we began reading last week. Saul, a thorn in the flesh of the ancient church, was confronted by Jesus Christ in the midst of his zealous persecution of Christ's disciples. He had caused considerable misery, and now he gave it up to join the church, under the name of Paul.

Today we recall that his presence as a zealous convert caused almost as many problems as his persecution did.

Understandably the first disciples he met, in Damascus (in present day Syria), immediately after his conversion, were hesitant to believe him, till the Ananias vouched for his sincerity. And today we hear, sometime later, that the members of the church in Jerusalem still 'did not believe that he was a disciple' and so they rebuffed his attempts to worship with them. It was only when Barnabas, well-respected by all, took charge of the situation that Paul was believed.

And then Paul began to cause controversy by his lecturing and preaching about Jesus. Not only was he now a member of the upstart 'resurrection sect', he had been one of the rabbis who had rejected the claims of Jesus and the story of the resurrection. And on top of that he was 'from away'. Did you notice that?

Paul was from Tarsus, hundreds of miles away in present day Turkey, and so was called a Hellenist, a foreign Jew. So he caused considerable embarrassment to his fellow Hellenists in Jerusalem. In fact Paul caused so much controversy the church intervened. The story closes with these words: 'When the believers learned of it, they brought him down to Ceasarea (the sea port) and sent him off (by ship) to Tarsus (where he came from).' Only in Paul's absence (whether unconverted or converted), we read, did the church have 'peace' and 'was built up.'

This was the reality of the life of the early church. There were, thank God, miracles like the one that Peter participated in with Tabitha (called Dorcas). But life was often complicated by faith, before Christian faith began to transform the shared life of the first Christians.

This too is our reality, and to our reality we will return.

The story from the book of *Revelation* is from a book that the early church accepted, slowly, and was long hesitant about. It is a book of visions, some bloody, and some glorious—all meant for our good.

The story we heard last week is the first part of this week's reading. Do you recall last week's? It began a liturgical story, a story of worship. First the angelic creatures, created by God at the dawn of time, sing out the victory song of the cross and resurrection, around God's throne. We overhear the song.

'They sing a new song (to Jesus): "You are worthy to take the scroll and to open its seals, for you were slaughtered and by your blood you ransomed for God saints from every tribe and language and people and nation; you have made them to be a kingdom and priests serving our God'."²

And then, we heard last week, the angelic hosts respond, 'singing with full voice,' we hear: 'Worthy is the Lamb.'

And then St. John hears 'every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the sea...singing: "To the one seated on the throne and to the Lamb be blessing and honour and glory and might forever and ever."³

This is the beginning of the heavenly liturgy that we are meant to reflect in our own Sunday liturgies.

The heavenly liturgy continues in this Sunday's reading from the book of *Revelation*: 'After this I looked, and there was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb robed in white, with palm branches in their hands.'

And this motley crew 'cried out in a loud voice, "Salvation belongs to our God who is seated on the throne, and to the Lamb!"

And in response all the angelic creatures, we hear, "fell on their faces before the throne, and worshipped God, singing, "Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honour and power and might be to our God for ever and ever! Amen'."

What do we hear (or overhear) this morning? The two stories are really about Sunday and the rest of the week for Christians. We worship on Sundays with all our hearts and arts, and we live in the echo of this worship all week long—or we are meant to do so.

² *Revelation* 5.9-10. All biblical quotations, unless noted, are from the *New Revised Standard Version*.

³ *Revelation* 5.13.

Worship, we call liturgy to honour our ancestors in the faith. Liturgy is that biblical word that means both the service of our lives at all times, and corporate services of worship. Without both, the church gets stalled. If we worship on Sundays, but see our Sunday worship as an escape from reality, worship will become a distraction, perhaps a pleasant one, from the rest of reality. If we try to live our weekly Christian lives without regular corporate worship, we shall be damaged for lack of the church—our fellow redeemed creatures—who by nature need each other’s company before God’s throne.

As Christians, we don’t wait for miracles to solve all our problems, as much as we celebrate the great wonder of Christ’s death and resurrection together, and live it out with our lives all week long.

Did you overhear the promises at the ending of today’s story? In the midst of the poetry and music there is an urgent challenge given. There are rich, beautiful, complex words about a Lamb on a throne who is in fact a shepherd. There are robes made white by the love that is coloured the red of blood, of life sacrificed for us. This is the nature of human endeavours to express the wonder of God’s work in human life.

And woven in between all of this is our mandate, our guiding vision: ‘They worship [Christ] day and night within his temple...They will hunger no more, and thirst no more.’

We are the miracle, the body of Christ, created by God—the church. We are those for whom feeding the hungry is an act of worship that flows out of our corporate worship, and for whom feeding the hungry leads us back into corporate worship. This vision of St. John helps us understand the significance of all we do, apart or together, as worship, as acts, as a life of gratitude for what God has granted us in Jesus Christ.

The bread of the Eucharist, the bread of Holy Communion received at the table or given at our own tables, or given at other’s table—it is all the gift of God. And we are implicated in it from beginning to end.

Thanks be to God!