

Pentecost II (C)
I Kings 17.1-16/ Galatians 1.1-24/ Luke 7.11-17
St. Paul's Church, Halifax
10 June 2007

“FED BY THE BIRDS”

~Paul H. Friesen~

As you might know, we have just finished passing through the most intense months of the Christian year. Our pilgrimage began with Advent near the beginning of December and has just wound up with the Ascension (three weeks ago), Pentecost (two weeks ago), and (last Sunday) the Trinity.

We began the church year with the announcement of Christ's coming. We have celebrated Christ's birth, and baptism and life of ministry—and then his passage through suffering and death to what we Christians call 'Glory', as the church came into being.

The half of the year we are now entering might be called 'the long green season'. Green is the colour of Sundays not claimed by special celebrations in our calendar. But we're not invited, by our spiritual ancestors, to somehow view the rest of the year as second-rate.

Every Sunday is, after all, the Lord's Day, a celebration of the Resurrection of Christ—as the Sabbath was once a commemoration of the Creation of the Universe. And the colour Green is, after all, the colour of growth. We are in a season of growth now, full of opportunities to make something of the pilgrimage we have been on in the company of Christ.

So, it is a bit of a shocker to encounter at this turning point the Epistle to the Churches of the Roman province of Galatia, in what is today central Turkey, the territory surrounding the capital, Ankara. After the customary, pleasant greetings, promising God's grace, the Apostle Paul turns on these churches (1.6) with the sternest scolding he is ever recorded as having given.

'I am astonished', he says, 'that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel—not that there is another gospel' he adds.¹ 'Gospel' is an important word for St. Paul. He uses it here five times in the course of a few sentences.

¹*Galatians 1.6* All biblical quotations are from the *New Revised Standard Version* unless attributed otherwise.

Some of those circulating among their churches, Paul says, ‘want to pervert the Gospel’. The communities of Galatia shouldn’t believe Paul himself, he adds, or even an angel from heaven, if either of them ‘proclaims...a gospel contrary to what [they] have received.’

So what had the Galatians received—what have we received? What is the Gospel? ‘We have come to believe in Christ Jesus,’ he tells them in the next chapter, ‘so that we might be justified by faith in Christ, and not be doing the works of the law, because no one will be justified by the works of the law.’²

The Apostle expresses this key truth of justification by faith in many ways, in this epistle alone: but each expression has something in common and this is it. We cannot prove ourselves to God to and get on his ‘A list’. But through the gift of the life of Christ we can in faith regain a living friendship with the God who created us.

So St. Paul talks about the life of faith—in strong language—to the Galatians. He describes the life of faith as ‘being crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live but Christ who lives in me.’³ It would talk awhile for us to absorb this metaphor, but it awaits all who live the life of faith.

But Paul also develops a different comparison to explain the life of faith in his letter to the Galatians. He describes the life of self-justification as being locked up in a bad school with pointless exams; as being in the care of guardians who are checking lists rather than helping one grow.⁴

The Apostle describes the life of faith, as the opposite: it is a life of creative, healthy freedom in the care of a parent to whom we have nothing to prove. He puts it this way: ‘When the fullness of time had come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, in order to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as children. And because you are children, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, “Abba! Father! [Dad!]”.’⁵

The life and death and resurrection of Christ has proven who are parent is—this has justified us. No good behaviour we could ever drum up would prove us God’s children. But God’s own declaration of parenthood through Christ does prove it beyond any reasonable doubt.

The question is: how can we remember this?

Well, its not so hard to admire the life of faith from afar, to hear great stories of faith and applaud them, without seeing how the point at our continuing attempts at self-justification. The Gospel story is such a case.

² *Galatians* 2.16.

³ *Galatians* 2.29-20.

⁴ *Galatians* 3.23-4.3.

⁵ *Galatians* 4.4.4-6.

Jesus is on his way into the town of Nain with his disciples, who are enthused about the power of the Gospel, about the life of faith. As they are entering, a funeral procession is leaving. The only son of a widow has died—there may well have been daughters but we don't know. Her slender hopes for survival as a peasant widow have died with her son, who was her guarantee of a little help from her husband's peasant family. She 'in effect was an "orphaned parent"'.⁶

But Jesus with his word and his hand rouses the son, and presents him to his mother. Her life, and her life of faith is roused at the same time. The unfailing fatherhood of God has given her back her life of motherhood, and her livelihood, and her life itself.

Here the life of faith is so clearly not the life of self-justification. It is a gift of God, and many of us here have enjoyed this sort of resurrection of faith in extreme moments, and all of us will encounter it and we hope embrace it in extreme moments yet to come.

There is a tendency for all of us to feel deeply moved by such stories, and to think (sub-consciously) that the life of faith is for extreme situations, and then to get on with the life of self-justification. There we are checking lists, hoping to build up a good balance of behaviour so that God will say, 'Yep, there's one of my kids.' She's mine.

The story of Elijah is for all of us. This is the earliest story of the prophet who would call down fire from heaven in a show-down with the pagan gods. How was his life of faith going in this story? Not so well.

Elijah's commission from God was to tell the King of Israel, Ahab, the truth. Ahab wanted to be a great king. He wanted Israel to be a world-class nation—and to develop a civilization like the civilization of the Phoenicians to the north.⁷

Ahab had snagged a Phoenician princess, Jezebel, in fact, and with her a treaty with that great nation. And with such a treaty, throughout the ancient Middle East, along with a foreign princess came the requirement that one build a shrine to her gods so she could worship in a strange land. This Ahab had provided for his bride. He did not take kindly to religious traditionalists like the Company of Prophets to which Elijah belonged. They were always going on about the one God, who had brought them out of slavery in Egypt, and whose worship was the only way forward for Israel. Ahab wanted to broaden horizons, to truly move forward.⁸

⁶ Herman Hendrickx, *The Third Gospel for the Third World: Volume Two-B* (Collegeville: Glazier, 1998), p.27.

⁷ Leo Honor, *Jewish Commentary for Bible Readers: Book of Kings I* (New York: Union of Hebrew Congregations, 1955), p. 245.

⁸ See Honor, *Kings I*, p. 241, 245.

But there was no fire from heaven to back up Elijah this time. He reminded Ahab of God's frustration and anger, that Ahab had with his actions refused to enjoy God's parenthood as Ahab played politics and attempted to be the Father of Israel himself. No sooner had Elijah uttered his words than he fled. What kind of a reward was this for Elijah! Of course, God's parenthood is not a reward. So Elijah didn't earn it.

In his exile God's care came to Elijah in unexpected ways. God fed him by the birds in his own land, and by the hand of a widow, in of all places, the land of Phoenicia where he found secret refuge.

This isn't the way it's supposed to be. God feeds the bird, we're told, in the Sermon on the Mount. Perhaps we feed the birds, or the ducks perhaps, with a little child in tow. We have programmes to feed widows and orphans, perhaps we even welcome them into our own homes. This is good.

But here God's fatherhood comes to Elijah the great prophet through the birds who feed him and through the poor widow who feeds him. This is not the sign of a tragedy for the prophet, but (eventually) the opening up of a deeper life of faith. 'Do not be afraid', Elijah is able to say. It is a situation, and a truth, he will meet again.

Nothing he can do will earn God's favour. God is his parent.

And here St. Paul's words come to us. God's grace isn't 'on tap' for us when we are desperate. To live in faith is to live in God's grace all the time. This is the message of the true Gospel, there is no 'other Gospel', no Gospel that allows some of us to need God more than others.

Perhaps we should look around us this week and ask: am I able to be fed by the birds, to have the widow assist me? Can I receive the grace of God from those less educated, less wealthy, less experienced, less prudent than I think I am? Because we all eat and drink at the same table. We all enjoy the same grace. Thanks be to God! Alleluia!