

OXEN, DONKEYS, AND CHILDREN

Pentecost XI (19C)
Isaiah 1.1-20/Hebrews 11.1-16/Luke 12.32-40
St. Paul's Church, Halifax
12 August 2007

~Paul H. Friesen~

I ran into a friend of mine this week in the Diocesan Book Room. He told me the happy news that he and his wife were expecting...a puppy...a Spaniel. He's about the traditional age for a married guy to have his first child, so I asked: 'Is this a ploy to get your parents-in-law off your tail? Aren't they expecting... grandchildren rather than a puppy?' 'He smiled and said: 'Maybe they think this is good training.'

I didn't think he was keen to talk about the politics of grandparents-in-waiting. So instead he and I started to talk about the puppy, soon to be delivered, and possible names for it, and whether it would be 'fully trained' when it arrived. 'Not really,' he said, 'but it will be already trained to come when it's called. That's the most important thing, you know'—he said—'if you have that the rest isn't hard.'

To hear God when God calls—this is our spiritual problem, isn't it? *We need to hear God call our name, and come. This is the first great truth of this morning's Scriptures.*

We have just heard the opening words of Isaiah, the greatest of the ancient prophets. 'Hear, O heavens and listen, O earth; for the Lord has spoken. I reared children and brought them up, but they have rebelled against me. The ox knows its owner, and the donkey its master's crib; but...my people do not understand.'¹

God, the father, is devastated—because God is remembering the youth of his children and pining for the delight of calling out the names of his toddlers and seeing them run to him from down the street.

This is the nature of the God we confess. In the pagan world of Isaiah's day the chief duty of the gods of various nations was to beget humanity—yes—but there the duty ended.² Only the Israelites confessed a God who was a true parent.

As it says at the beginning of the book of *Genesis*: Then God said, 'Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness...So God created

¹ *Isaiah* 1.1-3. All biblical quotations are from the *New Revised Standard Version* unless noted otherwise.

² John Oswalt, *The Book of Isaiah: Chapters 1-39* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986), p.86.

humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them...'

And then they forgot that they were God's children, and presumed to act in God's place. So we read: 'They heard the sound of the LORD God walking in the garden at the time of the evening breeze, and the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the LORD God among the trees of the garden. But the LORD God called to the man, and said to him, 'Where are you?''³ It's not hard to see the work of the true parent here.

The Israelites never completely forgot this. 'When Israel was a child, I loved him...Yet it was I who taught Ephraim to walk, I took them up in my arms...I was to them like those who lift infants to their cheeks. I bent down to them and fed them' —these were the words of the prophet Hosea.⁴

The language of God, revealed by the Isaiah, is full of anguish, like the words of parents with a child who has been reduce to living on the street. 'Why do you seek further beatings?' asks God, 'From the sole of the foot even to the head, there is no soundness in it, but bruises and sores and bleeding wounds.'⁵

They had stopped hearing God's voice, little by little. They had somehow, said Isaiah, forgotten that they were God's children. Religion had become detached from their life as God's children. The worship of their Maker had become so unreal to them that they confessed one thing and did the opposite, but felt no contradiction. But God did.

'Your new moons and your appointed festivals my soul hates...When you stretch out your hands, I will hide my eyes from you; even though you make many prayers, I will not listen; your hands are full of blood.' God sees the blood on the hands raised in prayer. Like our spiritual ancestors, we are no more clever than the child who lovingly tucks her hand in her dad's, smudged with the chocolate she was forbidden to eat. We are children, whether we admit it or not.

Isaiah's message was not meant to discourage the worship the Israelites had promised to offer—no more than we are told to avoid our parish liturgies if we are feeling 'unspiritual' or 'not up for it.' Isaiah didn't encourage less religion, but more. Don't think, we might say today, that serving on a committee, or reading the Bible, or using the right, pious

³ *Genesis* 1.26-27; 3.8-9.

⁴ *Hosea* 11.1-4.

⁵ *Isaiah* 1.5-6.

words, or even going to the Eucharist is the limit of our religion. Because our faith is a living relationship between children and a parent.

Worship is our essential family dinner, but we are still a family the rest of the week. To put it another way: True religion spills out of the sanctuary and into the rest of life, into how we live out our days. This is why God wants us to hear his voice hour by hour, in and out of church.

To hear and come when God calls our name; that's the most important thing. If you have that the rest isn't hard.' This is the first great truth of this morning's Scriptures.

But what are we supposed to do after we turn towards our creator, and listen?

We need to talk with God about our relationship with him, our parent, and talk with him about our relationship with the rest of the family. This is the second great truth of this morning's Scriptures.

And so Isaiah concludes his first prophecy: 'Come now, let us argue it out, says the Lord, through your sins are like scarlet, they shall be like snow.'⁶ This isn't the logic of chemistry, as anyone knows who has tried to paint over a red wall with white paint. It is the divine logic. If we turn to God and tell the truth about ourselves, God will take us in his arms and tell us the truth about our future and the future of our family and empower us to love our maker and love our fellows—something we confess, after all.

Today's Gospel describes our future: 'Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom.'
Today's Epistle uses similar words about our destination; 'the city that has foundations, whose architect and builder is God'... 'a homeland'... 'a better country.'⁷

How to get there is no mystery, but learning to love our God and our neighbour with one love, in and out of worship.

The Gospel puts it this way: 'Do not be afraid...Sell your possessions, and give alms...For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also...Be dressed for action and have your lamps lit.'⁸ The way forward is in simplicity, with lightened loads, like children happy with the comforts of a family in the home of a loving parent.

⁶ *Isaiah* 1.18. 'Reason together' is the milder translation of the Hebrew very rendered 'argue it out' offered by the scholars of the *New Revised Standard Version* who perhaps understand better the vigorous communications of a healthy Middle Eastern family.

⁷ *Luke* 12.32; *Hebrews* 11.10, 14,16.

⁸ *Luke* 12.32-35

Isaiah puts it this way: 'Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean...learn to do good; seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow.'⁹

Forgive me, at this stage of my life, if I say this sounds a bit like the evening bath for children, with stories and prayers about what really matters, and the best, simple intentions for the next day.

Forgive me, if I say that a child's work is instruction for all of us; that none of us rises above the need for God to wash us, and instruct us, and tuck us into bed with the promise of his love. If we hear that, then perhaps we can begin to wade through the flood of dishonesty, and cruelty and violence we meet in the news daily.

If we hear that we can begin to understand what we must do this week in our parish outreach programmes, in our daily commitments and as citizens—and in the midst of our family and among our circles of friends.

We begin all of this right here. We wash—no, we are washed when we confess our sins against our God and our neighbour and are baptized and we are washed whenever we hear God's promise of absolution—cleansing, genuine forgiveness. And we proceed to gather around the table when we are all called to dine. And we eat the bread and drink the wine because it is God's way of feeding us—and it has been since Christ's last supper with his disciples.

We will need to do good and seek justice this week. We will meet the oppressed, the orphan, and the widow. And we will meet many more of the human family in need of goodness and justice. Unless we lock our doors and windows, turn off our phone, and unplug our televisions and computers, and refuse to speak to family and friends we will meet them.

We can't fix everything. We really can't 'fix' anything—it is a magnificent world, made by a divine architect, and we are part of this creation, not its makers. But...we can hear God's call and hear the voice of our neighbour, and we can defend, and rescue and plead for those we have harmed and those other folks have harmed—including the waters and the forests and the creatures in them.

'I reared children and brought them up'---so says Isaiah's God and ours too. There is nothing harder to do than what is required in the playground—nor is there anything easier. But it all begins and ends with being washed and fed by God.

⁹ *Isaiah* 1.16-17.