

Pentecost II (A)
Isaiah 49.8-16a/Psalm 131/I Corinthians 1.1-17/Matt. 6.24-34
St. Paul's Church, Halifax
25 May 2008

Has God Forgotten?

~Paul H. Friesen~

How does God answer us when we say, 'The Lord has forsaken me'?

We actually do say this in many ways—we all do. It's the same question that the Israelites put to God, as the prophet Isaiah has just told us.

'God has forgotten about me.' 'God doesn't care.' Or, 'God doesn't care about this'. Or, 'Why did God do this to me?' Or, 'Why did God let this happen to me?'

Our Scriptures, and our experience of God through faith, can't really give easy answers to these hard questions. But the Scriptures and our experience of God through faith, if we let them, will tell us what God says to us in response.

We are given two pictures in the Scriptures this morning.

This is the first one that Isaiah delivers for God to his discouraged friends:
Can a woman forget her nursing-child, or show no compassion for the child of her womb? Even these may forget, yet I will not forget you.

This is the second one that the poet of the psalms offers to us, someone who has heard God's voice:

I have calmed and quieted my soul, like a weaned child with its mother; my soul is like the weaned child that is with me. O Israel, hope in the Lord, from this time on and for evermore.

When we are distressed God holds us like a trustworthy adult holds a child in her arms, or in his arms.

The first picture we understand right away. Not even half the human race knows what it is like to breast-feed a child. But we have all seen the unconditional love the nursing-mother gives the child at her breast. How could a woman ever forget this child, the prophet Isaiah asks.

But, says the Lord—'Even these may forget, yet I will not forget.'

How does God answer us when we say, 'The Lord has forsaken me'? The first picture presents God as a nursing mother, and even more than that. Regardless of the cause of our complaint, regardless of our own blame, when we blame God he does not forget us—in fact, God cannot forget us.

'See,' says the Lord through Isaiah, 'I have inscribed you on the palms of my hands': God has tattooed our names on the divine hands, the same hands that made the universe and all of us in it.

The second picture we understand right away as well. Not all of us have fed a child at the breast, or shall ever.

But most of us, perhaps all of us, have held a child, perhaps our own, a toddler who has been weaned—and now trusts a larger community.

We've held on our lap a neighbour's child, or a friend's; or we've held a niece or nephew in our arms and felt their absolute trustfulness.

This is what the Psalmist means when he says—or she says—'my soul is like the weaned child that is with me.'

So, says the palmist, is the soul that has been quieted by God's embrace.

Whatever the cause of the distress, whatever our complaint, God tells us that we are to him like the weaned child, whose trustfulness shall not be betrayed.

Some adults betray this trustfulness, and it breaks our hearts and fires up our moral anger when it happens.

But God will never betray our trust.

These are the two pictures of God's response to us, when we complain that God has abandoned us. And all of us need to hear God's response, not just once or twice, but as a part of our daily life—perhaps even today. The two pictures, one from the prophet and the other from the poet of today's psalm make one big point.

Though it feels like God might have abandoned us, God has not. If God did abandon us, he could not possibly be God.

And this we hear in the Gospel, in a passage so dear to the heart of St. Francis, and to everyone who opens their ears. In it Jesus describes the kind of God that Isaiah has described.

'Look at the birds of the air,' said Jesus, 'they neither sow nor reap or gather into barns, and yet your heavenly father feeds them.'

And Jesus adds—God the Father clothes the grasslands with flowers, not because they have earned his care anymore than we have, but because God is their parent.

God feeds us and God clothes us—like a mother or a father. This is what God reminds us of when we feel abandoned. God will never stop being a parent to us.

Now you can probably see the second point coming from a mile away. If God answers us like God does, we are meant to extend the same loving kindness to the people around us, when they complain they have been abandoned, rightly or wrongly.

Isaiah puts it simply in a few words: ‘I have helped you...I have helped you...I have kept you and given you as a covenant to the people.’

We know that the Ten Commandments were a covenant between God and our ancestors the Israelites.

And we have heard in the Scriptures that Jesus’ life and death and resurrection are for us the basis of a new covenant—between us and our God.

But how can the Israelites, and how can we ourselves, be a covenant, given by God to others?

St. Paul, in his letter to the Corinthian church, gives us a hint. As he has known God’s love, so he becomes God’s love to those God has given him.

The Apostle is not happy—as I’m sure you could tell—in this section of the letter. He scolds the members of that church for being competitive with each other by favouring one apostle over another. He scolds them for imagining that they had earned every gift God had given them.

‘If you received it,’ he reminds the Corinthians, ‘why do you boast as if it were not a gift?’ This is the completely wrong approach to stewardship, he says. Strong words, for a pastor.

And then he applies sarcasm, pretty thickly: ‘Already you have all you want!’ he says. ‘Already you have become rich! Quite apart from us you have become kings! Indeed, I wish you had become kings, so that we might be kings with you!’ These are hard words for an apostle to speak on behalf of all the apostles.

And yet...this has not altered the Apostle Paul’s relationship with the Corinthians congregation: ‘I am not writing this to make you ashamed, but to admonish you as my beloved children.’ Instead, he says: ‘Though you might have ten thousand guardians in Christ, you do not have many fathers. Indeed, in Christ Jesus I became your father through the Gospel. I appeal to you then, became imitators of me.’

St. Paul is reminding this church, and reminding us, that he is like a father to it, a good father, whose loving arms are around the members of his congregation regardless of the big mistakes they make.

And he says to them: imitate me. Don't imitate my errors or my folly. I'm not God. But imitate God's loving kindness. As I am a Father to you, be a parent to each other, be parents to those around you. In other words, be God's covenant, be God's pledge of love to the world.

As God has loved you like a Father or a Mother, regardless of how you have failed, so love the people around you. This is the message.

It's all completely simple, and incredibly difficult. Parents know what it is to fail in their love as well as in their discipline when it comes to young children—and when it comes to children of all ages. And we all know what it is to fail in our parental duty to everyone else.

The prophet Isaiah, the Apostle Paul, and Jesus himself are not saying we are pampered or indulged by God. We are loved by God. God doesn't stop being our Father.

And we are God's covenant to the world—we never stop being that as long as we live. That is who we are. So of course, the more we refuse God's loving arms, the harder it is to put our arms around others.

But because God never stops loving us, we never stop being God's covenant, how much we fail. And this is why we must never stop gathering around the Lord's Table, where we are fed.

A modern church might have—we should have—a good ministry plan. Still, results will be slender and shallow and short-lived. Unless, that is, we become God's covenant when we hear the pain of others.

We are fed at the Lord's Table like the child who has had the naughtiest afternoon imaginable. We will have disciplined the child, of course. That is important, but another story. But we will not deny him food, or deny her a place at the table. This is how we see all those who walk through our doors, all those in our neighbourhood.