

Epiphany V (B)  
*Isaiah 40.21-31; I Corinthians 9.16-24; Mark 1.29-39*  
St. Paul's Church, Halifax  
8 February 2009

~Paul H. Friesen~

What did Jesus think he was doing in today's Gospel story?

In North America many theological colleges and seminaries have been attracted to sociological surveys and communications strategies. Some see them as the scientific keys to church growth and success. By the rules of this highly questionable 'church science', the Jesus of today's Gospel badly needed a new manager or agent.

For instance, instead of a little 'meet and greet' on the synagogue steps with the influential pillars of the community after the service, Jesus immediately attends to the mother-in-law of one of his humble fisherman-disciples.

And when the ball really gets going with the crowds, who are wonderfully dazzled by Jesus' gifts and find him, Jesus prevents further free publicity that would have gotten his name around important communities much more quickly.

And then Jesus disappears, not to play hard to get and pump up his popularity, but because Jesus really didn't want the attention even of his disciples at that time. Instead Jesus needed to go on a spiritual retreat, so he did.

And when his disciples encourage Jesus to make capital of the crowds who are pursuing him at the moment, he says 'no'—'let's go to places we've never been and start over from scratch!' And then he goes.

What did Jesus think he was doing?

Well, the first generation of the church that collected the stories about Jesus did not think Jesus was being foolish or irresponsible, or they would hardly have passed on this story to the next generation. Nor did they believe that Jesus set out to wreck the expectations and the hopes of the people that collected around him.

But Jesus did know who he was, and what he should be doing regardless of what his disciples thought, or the crowds thought, or religious and political officials thought.

In this season of the remembrance of the incarnation of God among us, we have heard the treasured stories of Jesus' birth and life, his baptism and are now hearing the stories of his ministry. And we will hear the stories of opposition and suffering and death too—and then the resurrection.

God drew near to us in the birth and life and death and resurrection of Jesus, so that we could draw near to God, so that we could live the lives that were meant for us. To walk as Jesus walked, and live as Jesus lived, is what disciples learn to do. And everyone is called to the life of the disciple at their baptism, called by God's complete love for each of us.

But of course, we are not Jesus!

We are not the unique manifestation of God in the life of a fellow human being. We weren't born of virgins; we can't say we are one with God the Father and God the Holy Spirit; we didn't die for the sins of the world or break open the gates of hell and death in our resurrection.

But we follow the one who we profess did and was all these things. And we can live lives that wonderfully, beautifully reflect the life of Christ; the life of Christ revealed to us in the Scriptures this morning.

*First, we can know who we are: God's children; loved by the Creator and made for joy.*

*Second, we can know how to live; God's children; redeemed by our Saviour for the good of our world.*

To begin at the beginning: *Who are we?*

God's love is what propelled God to create us in his image; to make the world larger rather than smaller.

And this takes us behind our own creation to the creation of the universe and the words of the prophet Isaiah which we have just heard. *Lift you your eyes on high and see: Who created these? He who brings out their host and numbers them, calling them all by name; because he is great in strength, mighty in power, not one is missing.*

The Christian response to our wonderful universe is not that we are insignificant, or that we can claim we understand it, but that we are an integral part of it—

The universe whose every star is named by its creator.

We were all named by God before our birth—if we don't believe this then our God is a whole lot smaller than the one we actually profess and a little frightened by what we call 'forces' or 'factors' or 'global realities'. We are not victims of 'forces' in the end, though it might look like it. Sadly, many folks

today believe as much in the power of pagan ‘forces’ as people in the time of Christ believed in pagan ‘gods’.

These are sub-Christian beliefs. We are children of God, the God who named us, the only God, who created us in love.

Has it ever seemed odd to you that from the first pages of the Bible human names are everywhere? Has it ever seemed odd to you that in the great creed, the Nicene Creed, there are actual human names; Jesus, Mary who of her free will gave birth to him, and Pontius Pilate who of his free will sent Jesus to his death?

It might seem odd, but it’s not. We are all named, whatever good or bad choices we make. And we are all loved or there would be no purpose to the Christian story of universal human redemption.

And all of us can enter into the love of God, which is as vital to us as the blood that courses through our veins, the love which is our strength.

*Have you not heard?* said the prophet, *The Lord is the everlasting God, the Creator of the end of the earth. He does not faint or grow weary. Even youths will faint and be weary, and the young will fall exhausted.*

In my personal experience, though it happens several hours after I fall faint and weary and exhausted, children and youths finally succumb to it too!

*But those who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength, they shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint.*

*Who are we?* We are God’s children, loved into existence, made to find joy in life. We will need sleep, and we will fall sick, and we will require rehabilitation, of course.

But we will pass through life in joy and spiritual strength the more we remember who we are. We are at one and the same time caught with God’s love for the whole universe to which God gave birth, and we are named in God’s love like the stars, each of us loved with a name God has for us.

If we believe in a smaller God, we will believe in a smaller us. We will forget who we are and take polls and seek reassurances and check the mirror one to many times. We will try to get people to tell us we are worthy of being in their company. *But we know who we are. That’s always first.*

*Second, we can know how to live; God’s children; redeemed by our Saviour for the good of our world.*

It might seem strange that we would consult St. Paul here. After all, he just said to us: *I have become all things to all people.*

Isn't this a sign of his insecurity?

Actually, it's not. It is precisely because St. Paul knew who he was that the question of how to live in the company of others didn't worry him.

It's not that the Apostle simply turned in whatever direction he was called or became what ever the people in front of him demanded he become—not at all.

St. Paul told the Corinthians that he entered into the heart and mind and spirit of those entrusted to him, whoever they were, in order to bring them along on the path of the disciple.

St. Paul lived with others as he needed to for their own good, not to meet their contradictory expectations.

And we all need to live the same way, for each other's good.

It isn't always easy to live this way. It takes some training and some getting used to. But it is quite possible when we know who we are—loved of God and made for joy—and know how to live as we experience others living for our good, not to meet our whims or careless desires. St. Paul calls this 'working for each other's salvation' and 'sharing in the blessings of the Gospel.'

We have been talking of *who we are* and *how to live* as individuals who are going to walk back into the rest of life in less than an hour. We needed to do this, and will need to do it again as we walk through life.

But we need to talk also about *who we are* and *how to live* as a parish, as this parish.

So it's good to recall a few things we already know and have tucked away in our minds.

*Who are we?* We are not a spiritual affinity club, each with a similar profile, and shared likes and dislikes who have selected each other through a consumer survey. This may be obvious but it's very easy to forget.

*Who are we?* We are a spiritual family, like the church St. Paul wrote to in Corinth. But we do more than put up with each other, like members of a family should at least do in their worst moments. As a family we grow to appreciate each other's differences and gifts and unique experiences because we are all loved by God, called to be his children, called to welcome, to adopt, others into our spiritual family.

We are all tied by the same love of God to spiritual families throughout the world. We all are meant for joy in discovering our own uniqueness and discovering the hand of God in the uniqueness of others in our family.

*How do we live?* We are called to follow Christ by living as a family that eats and sings and talks together about the love of God in our creation and redemption—around the Lord’s Table. We are not called to live as those who ‘want to get something out of worship’—though not doubt we will give and receive in proportion to how we live as a family.

*How do we live?* As people whose jobs and lives are the places where who they are leads to lives giving what they really have to give, in every circumstance. As members of a family committed to, pledged to other families of our Anglican communion with whom we have a covenant, and of course as those pledged to other Christian communities, and then the human race who are loved by God with us.

*How do we live?* Not as those meeting the expectations of a hundred conflicting experts, but for the good of those in whose company we have been placed, on Barrington Street in a historic building, not on some other street in some other place. It is here that we live for the good of others; that we enter into the redemption of Jesus Christ.

*And we begin living now, in our prayers and around the Table and through our commitments to our neighbourhood, and by means of sharing our resources, our time, and the gifts that God has given each of us, for our joy and the joy of others.*

That’s who we are meant to be as human beings; that’s how we are meant to live as a Christian community.

*In the name of God; Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.*