

Justice and truth

The background to the Old Testament reading was the confrontation Elijah had with the 450 prophets of Baal. You will remember Elijah challenged them and they built an altar and put the bull on it and then called on Baal come down and devour the sacrifice with fire. Elijah mocked them saying, "Cry aloud for he is a God; either he is musing, or he has gone aside, or he's on a journey, or perhaps he's asleep and must be awakened." But despite their efforts, "as midday passed, they raved on until the time of the offering of the oblation: but there was no voice; No one answered, no one heeded." [1 Kings 18: 27 -29]

Then it is Elijah's turn and he really laying it on thick. He made the altar, cut the bull in pieces and laid it on the wood. And he said 'fill 4 jars with water and pour it on the burnt offering, and on the wood .' and he said, 'do it a second time and a third time.

Then Elijah prayed to the Lord and "the fire of the Lord fell and consumed the burnt offering, and the wood, and the stones, and the dust, and licked up the water that was in the trench." What Elijah did next it's not something we would really approve of. "Elijah brought the prophets down to the brook Kishon and killed them there." [1 King's 18:40)

Ahab the king was not pleased and wanted to kill Elijah who ran away and eventually came to mount Horeb the mount of God. This is where this morning's reading started. Elijah was very sorry for himself "I, even I only, am left; and they seek my life to take it away." Then the Lord replied and said, "Go out and stand on the mountain before the Lord, for the Lord is about to pass by." Now there was a great wind, so strong that it was splitting the mountains and breaking rocks in pieces... But the Lord was not in the wind, and after the wind an earthquake, but the Lord was not in the earthquake, and after the earthquake a fire, and after the fire a still small voice. " (1 Kings 18:11-12)

After that Elijah receives his instructions to sort out the kings of Syria and Israel but what strikes me about this is it in the midst of all the violence and bloodshed and anger we have "the still small voice".

Then in today's psalm we have these two wonderful verses: "Mercy and truth have met together; righteousness and peace have kissed each

other. Truth shall spring up from the earth; and righteousness looked down from heaven.” [Psalm 85: 10, 11] I will return to them later.

What has Paul got to tell us in this passage from the Romans? Verse 11 reads: “The scripture says, ‘no one who believes in him will be put to shame.’ For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek; the same Lord is Lord of all and is generous to all who call on him”. In his letter to the Galatians Paul expands on this saying:” There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, that is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus.”(3:28) So many voices are saying the exact opposite today. Might is not right. Surely one of our concerns as Christians is to make it quite clear that God's love, care, and concern is for all humanity and especially for the poor and outcast and those rejected by society.

And so to the gospel reading from Matthew. It is interesting to notice but this is one of the times when Jesus felt he had to get away by himself to pray. Then we have the story of how the disciples set out across the lake leaving him behind and they were hit by a storm. Then they see Jesus walking on the sea. To be honest I'm not sure what to make of this but I think the next section has a lot to say. When the disciples saw him walking on the sea they cried out saying, ‘It is a ghost’. Jesus immediately spoke to them and said, ‘Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid.” And then we have a bit of typical Peter who says: ‘Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water.’ Jesus responds immediately. ‘Come,’ he says. So Peter got out of the boat, started walking on the water, and came towards Jesus. So far so good but then he notices the strong wind and “Peter became frightened and beginning to sink he cried out, ‘Lord save me!’ Jesus immediately reached out his hand and caught him. (14:25-31)

I love that story. The rash, impetuous Peter always ready to give something a go and launches himself forth on the water but then loses his nerve and starts to sink. And Jesus immediately reaches out his hand and catches him. I find that hugely reassuring. It encourages me to be prepared to have a go at ventures that seems worthwhile and necessary even if risky. It seems to me that the Christian life is often about being prepared to take risks. It may be something very simple like

taking the initiative in talking to a stranger. It may be being prepared to take the initiative if a relationship is breaking down by contacting the other person and taking the risk of being rejected. It may be being prepared to speak up in a meeting when the whole discussion is going in a direction which you feel is fundamentally wrong and you feel you must express your misgivings even though it is likely to be unpopular. Or in a rather similar way and I think especially relevant at the moment, it may be being prepared to speak to a person or people with whose politics you disagree profoundly. It may be that it is important to see if it is possible to establish some common ground with them so that it is possible to find a way to at least be able to talk and have sensible conversations not merely shout slogans at one another. That is where I find the words from Psalm 85 so helpful. "Mercy and truth have met together; righteousness and peace have kissed each other." Having mercy does not mean that we have to ignore truth and speaking the truth does not mean speaking it without mercy. That is the sort of way to have it may be possible honest conversations which heal. What must it be like when you are involved in trying to bring the Palestinians and the Israelis together? What must it be like when you're trying to bring together Iran and the USA? Have mercy and truth really met together? Have righteousness and peace really kissed each other? But the underlying truth is that that *is* true. That is what humanity with God's help is capable of. That is part of what Christ proclaimed.

And when we launch out on necessary but risky ventures like these it is a huge reassurance to know that Jesus is standing by ready to reach out his hand to steady us when we start to lose our way, start to lose our nerve. Jesus said to Peter, "You of little faith, why did you doubt?" The faith we need is the faith in the basic God given goodness of humanity. Mercy and truth *can* meet together. Righteousness and peace *can* kiss one another. It is also a question of faith. Jesus is always there to encourage us to *take* the risk, and also ready to reach out his hand and to catch us and keep us safe, and help us to keep on taking the risks that need taking.

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