

Sermon – Sunday 30th May, 2010

Trinity Sunday

St. Barnabas' Anglican Church

The Reading

Romans 5:1-5

¹Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, ²through whom we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand; and we boast in our hope of sharing the glory of God. ³And not only that, but we also boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, ⁴and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, ⁵and hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.

The Gospel

John 16: 12-15

¹² I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. ¹³When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth; for he will not speak on his own, but will speak whatever he hears, and he will declare to you the things that are to come. ¹⁴He will glorify me, because he will take what is mine and declare it to you. ¹⁵All that the Father has is mine. For this reason I said that he will take what is mine and declare it to you. ¹⁶A little while, and you will no longer see me, and again a little while, and you will see me.'

The Sermon

May the True Word move swiftly from the ear to the heart, and from the heart to the World around us

Amen

As residents of Ontario, you've likely heard the story of the Great Blondin who, in 1859, walked on a tightrope stretched across Niagara Falls. History records that he first walked across with a balance pole, followed by a crossing pushing a wheelbarrow, in turn followed by walking the tightrope blindfolded. Upon addressing the adoring crowd afterwards, Blondin asked the crowd if they believed that he could cross the tightrope carrying someone on his back, to which the crowd responded "We Believe! We Believe!". Being the outgoing performer that he was, Blondin then asked for a volunteer. The people fell silent, and nobody stepped forward. Whereupon Blondin made a penetrating theological observation; "You believe", he said, "but not one of you has faith".

I'd like to begin today's sharing with you by considering this distinction between faith and belief. The kind of faith required to perch on someone's back while they walk across Niagara Falls on a 3 inch-wide slippery rope, which is quite a different thing from the belief that it can be done. One requires merely intellectual reason and assent; the other requires risking your life. So let's explore this connection between faith and certainty, belief and intellectual assent – and do so in the context of Trinity Sunday, which we celebrate today.

Life is full of choices and uncertainty, with the result that we develop doubts about many of the events and decisions in our lives. Will my family's choice of a place to live work out well for us all? Into what kind of a world will my children need to compete and make their way? Should I be somebody who sends others on missions, or should I perhaps go myself?

In Scripture, including the readings for today, I see some of those same uncertainties and misapprehensions circulating among the disciples – particularly when reading those glimpses of Jesus' ministry *prior* to his passion, resurrection and ascension – the period in which his disciples very often just didn't 'get it' – where they exhibited doubt, confusion and misunderstanding in a way that I can personally easily identify with. For example that wonderful scene in Mark 10:14-15 where the disciples decide to shoo-away a mob of children who are drawn to Jesus, only to be rebuked when Jesus says:

"Let the children come to me, do not hinder them; for to such belongs the kingdom of God. Truly, I say to you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child shall not enter it."

You can imagine the scene ... the disciples more than a little embarrassed from the public scolding. In their rush to please their Lord Jesus, they as yet misunderstood the nature of the Kingdom of God – they could not see what it was that a little child commands and that an adult harvest of sin does not – innocence, and a natural loving predisposition to faith, to the pleasure and glory of God. The disciples reasoned in the social context of the day that children had little to offer before God. It was Jesus who reminded them that the faith-likeness of a child is the key to heaven itself.

As our Gospel reading of last week recounts, Jesus' disciples experienced the momentous event of Pentecost as they convened in a room in a 'safe house' in Jerusalem, more than a little concerned of what might befall them as disciples of Christ in the face of Roman authority - notwithstanding their having been witness to the resurrection of Jesus. What was bestowed upon those first Apostles of the Church was something they could not earn, and did not *a priori* comprehend; something that God, out of His infinite love for us, offers to all those who are baptized into the death and resurrection of Jesus for our sins - the priceless gift of the Holy Spirit which flows through those of faithful heart.

As is written in John 7:

Up to that time the Spirit had not been given, since Jesus had not yet been glorified.

And Jesus taught them as much; that after he bodily leaves the disciples and ascends to the Father, only then will the faithful be imbibed with the Holy Spirit and only then be empowered to comprehend and project his ministry, as revealed in the words of today's Gospel message:

¹³When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth ¹⁶A little while, and you will no longer see me, and again a little while, and you will see me.'

So, *before* receiving the Spirit, the disciples are unable to reason their way forward in the love of God. *After* receiving the Spirit, this somewhat confused and fearful band of disciples become empowered in their faith to become the Apostles of Christ – energized to boldly evangelize the world without fear and with a renewed understanding of the ‘Good News’. Infused with the Holy Spirit they proceed to build the Church, and they do this out of an unwavering understanding that it is God’s will for us that we come to "exult in the hope of the glory of God."

So what is this Holy Spirit – this essential third aspect of the Trinity that is God? As one of the Church’s early Patristic authors, Hippolytus put it:

*It is the father who commands and the son who obeys and the Holy Spirit who gives understanding; The Father is above all, the Son who is through all, and the Holy Spirit who is in all. And we cannot think of one God, but by believing in truth in Father **and** Son **and** Holy Spirit.*

So ... God has three aspects; each distinct yet all three in one - consubstantial. To be touched by the Spirit is to be touched and moved by the hand of God himself.

It is St. Paul who perhaps ‘connects the faith-dots’ most clearly for us - from faith, to movement by the spirit, to reconciliation before God and finally to hope. We begin with faith: the conviction that Jesus Christ came into the world, lived a life of perfect righteousness, died in our place to bear the condemnation for our sins and was arisen to vindicate the success of his work. Everything good that subsequently accrues to us is owing to this. Without the passion and resurrection of Christ, there could be justice and wrath, but no salvation before God.

Grounded in faith, there *then* opens a ‘conduit’ through which God’s grace may flow to each of us. In our Protestant tradition, that Grace cannot be earned by any earthly deeds and it does not derive from some conceptual ‘understanding’ of the love of God – from reason - it derives from true faith, a faith of the heart. The availability of that Grace is never ending and without cost; indeed, it is a feature of God’s unending love for us.

With faith and the receipt of grace comes in turn justification [as Pauls says, "Therefore having been justified by faith . . ."]; where justification is a sort of sentence of acquittal, and the gifting to us of God's righteousness imbued in Christ – where we become no longer guilty before God's justice, but righteous.

And finally, there is the Peace of God. As Paul writes in today's Gospel:

*"Therefore, having been justified by faith, we have peace with God **through** our Lord Jesus Christ."*

Thus, the alienation between man and God arising from our sin, is absolved for those of faith. And from this absolution flows the boundless Peace of God which is beyond comprehension.

A heart filled with God's grace through faith is a heart open and willing to be moved by the Spirit. If one looks, you can see examples of the Spirit – the image of a loving God – all around us; I see it when little Kennedy Riley throws her arms wide and runs into Kelly French's arms on a Sunday School morning; I see it in the foodstuffs destined for the St. Mary's food bank in quantities out of proportion to our size as a Parish; I see it in the anonymous generosity of Parishioners to the Huron Camp program, and I see it in the many volunteers who work lovingly on behalf of *us*, the Parish, and the neighborhood in which we stand. Indeed, when you see the Trinity for what it really is, you can't help but set your hope in it, and in this hope you will *exult* in God.

What is that - to be in a state of exultation before God? The symptom for some is a tear of thanks during a quiet prayer, whereas for others it's a charismatic explosion of joy, and movement and song. Allow me to paint you a different, more powerful example; perhaps you remember seeing video news clips of hostages or prisoners of war being reunited with their family after many years of imprisonment.

Imagine those imprisonment years during which spouses had been faithful, children had grown up, neighborhoods changed. And then comes the news to the faithful; your loved one is alive - come to such-and-such a place on such-and-such a day and you will meet them. Those video scenes of reunion are overwhelming with emotion. But think of the emotional experience in the time *between* the phone call that said "They're alive," and the actual reunion itself. The experience in that intervening time is what I mean by exultation. During that time nothing has changed, except one thing: receipt of the 'Good News' that "Your partner is alive. You will see your loved one again." That news, is also the Gospel Good news. It is a news that creates assured hope. And it is assured hope, spawned by the Good News that changes everything else.

It has been said that the opposite of faith is not doubt; rather, the opposite of faith is the demand for certainty. In a world filled with uncertainties, faith thrives and faith fuels our reconciliation with God the Father. Faith is a state of abandonment of reason - a willingness to listen to God, and be moved through the Spirit. As Michael Ingham writes:

Faith is like love; it's not something through which you think your way. It is something that grasps you and turns you inside out. And once accepted it leads to its own logic: the way of empathy and compassion, the putting aside of self for the other, a dying to old realities and welcoming of new ones. For Christians, it is a decision to become formed and shaped in Christ, to take the leap of faith into his death and resurrection, and to hope in His glory.

When individually confronted by the opportunity to scale the shoulders of Christ, and have him convey you across the tightrope of life, I invite each of us to take the 'leap of faith' as Ingham describes it. I expect those of us who do so will never experience the union of thundering water and the world in quite the same way again. But whatever you do, of *this* you need have no doubt whatsoever; God wills that you exult in the hope of his glory through Faith – commanded by the Father, revealed through the Son ...

... and guided by the Holy Spirit.

Amen