

ST AIDAN'S UNITING CHURCH

SUNDAY 26 JULY 2009

Rev. Vladimir Korotkov

Ephesians 3: 14-21; John 6: 1-21

"Re-imagining"

Winter Warmth Humour

Two men dressed in pilots' uniforms walk up the aisle of the plane. Both are wearing dark glasses, one is using a guide dog and the other is tapping his way along the aisle with a white cane.

Nervous laughter spreads through the cabin, but the men enter the cockpit, the door closes, and the engines start up. The passengers begin glancing nervously around, searching for some sign that this is just a little practical joke. None is forthcoming.

The plane moves faster and faster down the runway, and the people sitting in the window seats realize they're headed straight for the water at the edge of the airport. As it begins to look as though the plane will plough into the water, panicked screams fill the cabin.

At that moment, the plane lifts smoothly into the air. The passengers relax and laugh a little sheepishly, and soon all retreat into their magazines, secure in the knowledge that the plane is in good hands.

In the cockpit, one of the blind pilots turns to the other and says,
"You know, Dennis, one of these days, they're gonna scream too late and we're all gonna die."

1. God with us in the push and the pelt

The rain to the wind said,
'You push and I'll pelt.'
They so smote the garden bed
That the flowers actually knelt,
And lay lodged--though not dead.
I know how the flowers felt.

Robert Frost, *Lodged*

Robert Frost sounds out the sense of the human condition, the "push and pelt" of life. Each of us at points in our lives have identified with how the flowers felt.

Both of our readings this morning use ancient images to show God's concern for our human predicament. The feeding of the 5,000 and Jesus walking on the water are the only stories found in all the gospels. They are central to the understanding of who Jesus and God are for us and our communities in times of struggle and need.

Yet, we must listen carefully to avoid a naïve understanding and easy solutions. William Loader's

words that “to walk over the deep is already a statement about victory over powerful forces” need to be qualified (<http://www.staff.murdoch.edu.au/~loader/MkPentecost8.htm>).

Ched Myers when commenting on Mark’s version of the story provides a corrective: “Jesus quells the wind but not the disciples apprehension” (Ched Myers, *Binding the Strong Man*, 197). Ched goes on to say that the “harrowing sea stories” are images for the not always successful attempts by the early Christian communities to overcome institutionalised social divisions (197).

We must also realise that John is not focusing on the miraculous. He relates a different kind of power.

Rick Marshall writes:

Treating any of these stories as miracles leads to misinterpreting the text as a story where God, through Jesus, acts outside the rules of nature and imposes what would otherwise be impossible. A superficial reading of the story misses the metaphorical depth of even asking the question, what kind of power is this? The action is seen as coming from “above” when in fact Jesus tells us it comes from “within.” If the action comes from above, then we cannot get beyond it being a miracle. But if the power comes from within, then we can begin to talk about the mystery of life and how death can be transformed into new life in the present moment...

The idea of power “within” and a power that “gives” instead of “taking”...

<http://www.processandfaith.org/lectionary/YearB/2008-2009/2009-07-26.shtml>

2. Jesus interprets himself

John’s intent in this passage is to reveal the divine in human life. Jesus interprets himself, and interprets God in his actions. Neither the crowd nor the disciples understand him. Human beings seek to control and possess the other, even God, and are unaware of the anxieties and fears that motivate their desires and actions. Yet God has always sought a loving relationship with human beings. There are many Old Testament images as a background in John’s story:

Yahweh accompanying Israel on their journey to freedom. In Psalm 107 we read that the people wander hungry in desert place and God fills them with good things; some go down to the sea in ships, a storm rises, they are troubled and cry out and God delivers them, calming the sea.

(Raymond E Brown, *The Gospel of John*, Vol 1, 255)

As William Loader states, while John does not simply equate Jesus and Yahweh,

“Jesus so much represents God, that ... to relate to him is to relate to God ... Our tradition found ways of formulating that relationship more precisely and sustaining its mystery. What matters most is the relationship of shared life, of Jesus with God and of the believer with God.” (op cit).

This shared life is graphically and prayerfully articulated in our Ephesians reading: that Christ dwell in our hearts through faith; that we may have the power to grasp the unsurpassable love of Christ; and that we will be filled with the fullness of God. Again, in Bill Loader’s words: “Here love is the basis for constructing who we are, the soil which enables us to be nourished and to grow”. (<http://www.staff.murdoch.edu.au/~loader/BEpPentecost8.htm>)

3. Re-imagining ourselves, one another, differently

Our texts today call us into new possibilities. We are reminded that we are co-creators with God. We are those who are called to construct our lives out of the ground of love, and with the confidence that God will accompany us on our journeys.

All re-imagining and change of our personal lives, family relationships, institutional change become a hazardous boat journey. Unconscious anxieties and fears will always rise like a storm.

The Swedish movie *As it is in heaven*, which I spoke about a few months ago, is a metaphor of the difficult stages community experiences when new life is attempted. The movie is about the arrival of a famous conductor, Daniel, who arrives in a Swedish town and volunteers to conduct the church choir. Daniel's dream is "to create music that would open people's hearts." This totally changes the existing power dynamics in the church, one example being the minister's family that is destabilised.

Family systems theory teaches us that whenever a member of a family changes or wants to change, the family system becomes extremely anxious and attempts to pull them back into "normal" patterns. It is as if rubber bands connect all members and hold each member in the same place.

Inger, the minister's wife, represents the one re-imagining herself. With passion she attempts to change her partner, Stig, the minister. She has discovered a new identity and love of life through the choir, and asks Stig to change. Stig initially resists, as all humans do when we maintain and perpetuate "normal" family and group systems. With time and only when he deals with his unconscious anxieties and fears, he becomes more flexible and open to re-imagining his life.

To be human and particularly to be a person of faith means to be open to take new steps in our personal, relational and group life. We can only do this when we are grounded in love. The soil of love always grows into new things. New things grow regularly.

4. Re-imagining life "above the brim"

God always walks with us and calls us to climb the branches of life toward heaven, yes no matter how old we are, and then to leap out into new possibilities of life, to live "above the brim". As Seamus Heaney says of Robert Frost's poem *Birches*, which describe "a boy's joyful ascent toward the top of a slender birch tree", (*Homage to Robert Frost*, 73): "This seesawing between earth and heaven nicely represents"... "the phrase 'above the brim'".

He always kept his poise
To the top branches, climbing carefully
With the same pains you use to fill a cup
Up to the brim, and even above the brim.
Then he flung outward, feet first, with a swish,
Kicking his way down through the air to the ground.
So was I once myself a swinger of birches.
And so I dream of going back to be.
It's when I'm weary of considerations,
And life is too much like a pathless wood
Where your face burns and tickles with the cobwebs
Broken across it, and one eye is weeping
From a twig's having lashed across it open.

I'd like to get away from earth awhile
And then come back to it and begin over.
May no fate wilfully misunderstand me
And half grant what I wish and snatch me away
Not to return. Earth's the right place for love:
I don't know where it's likely to go better.
I'd like to go by climbing a birch tree-
And climb black branches up a snow-white trunk
Toward heaven, till the tree could bear no more,
But dipped its top and set me down again.
That would be good both going and coming back.
One could do worse than be a swinger of birches.

Robert Frost, *Birches*