

6 June 2010

PROPER 10C

1 Kings 17:8-24; Psalm 146; Galatians 1:11-24; Luke 7:11-17

In the scripture texts today, there's an overriding theme of new life. Both Hebrew reading and Gospel are stories about a woman who is a widow, who is the mother of one son; and that son dies. Although separated by 1000 years, the image represents an image of desolation. Women were dependent; usually on their husbands. And without other family, widows often readily became destitute, almost a non-person. The son represented a hope for the future; his death was the last straw. And so when the son is raised from the dead, this is new life, not just for the son, but also for his mother. Whenever anyone is brought back from the edge, from the margins, there is new life. And that is how the psalmist sings of this new life:

The Lord gives justice to those who are oppressed, and food to those who hunger.
The Lord sets the prisoners free; opens the eyes of the blind;
the Lord cares for the stranger; he sustains the orphan and widow.

And again in the New Testament text (Galatians), St Paul relates the great moment in his life on the road to Damascus when his allegiance changed, and he sees this as a receiving of new life.

But it was as I considered that Galatians reading that I was led towards new life in Christ in a somewhat (at first) surprising way. Now Galatians is a pretty feisty letter, and you realize by the way that Paul quickly plunges into a vigorous defence of the faith, and skips his customary polite commendations and thanksgivings, that something's going on here; it suggests a context of some peppy disagreements within the early church. In fact the most lively bit is omitted from the selections we'll be reading over the next four weeks (it comes between today's reading and next Sunday's). Now this isn't a conflict between Paul - who was clearly right, because he's a saint - and some nasty anonymous heretics, who are wrong, and shouldn't be thought of as Christians at all; no, this was a conflict between St Paul and the other great apostle, St Peter. Paul pulls no punches: he thinks Peter is completely wrong - "self-condemned"; and acting in "hypocrisy" in a way that others were "led astray" - not acting consistently with the truth of the gospel".

That's powerful stuff. So who was the heretic who should have been kicked out of the church, or at least be deposed as an Apostle: Peter or Paul? Who is not a real Christian: Peter or Paul?

Now I think most Christians would say neither. The conflict appears on the surface to be about dietary laws, but deeper down it's about these two Jews in conflict about the gospel being freely open to non-Jews. And today we'd probably say Peter was mistaken - but we might say that because Paul wrote lots of letters, and had built up a good fan base, and if Peter had been as prolific we might have had his version of this dispute, and would he have had some harsh things to say about Paul?

However, if Peter and Paul can disagree passionately about something that Paul describes as the very truth of the gospel, and we can celebrate both of them as saints and heroes of faith, why is it in today's Church when there are serious disagreements on important matters of faith, that we are so ready to condemn the others not only as completely wrong, but as outside the bounds of Christianity itself? Who should have been kicked out of the first-century Church, Peter or Paul? Whose teaching was dangerous? Whose ministry wasn't authentic, or not needed? And if these are silly questions to ask about Peter and Paul, what makes them any less silly to ask about our sisters or brothers today?

When the New Testament talks about the unity of the Church, it is a theology of diversity in unity: different gifts, different functions within Church; "Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of services, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone." (1 Corinthians) No-one is gifted or called to do everything; our ministries together are complementary; different parts of the Body, working together. John Paul II said: Unity does not mean merely tolerating diversity; rather, without diversity, unity does not exist.

The New Testament appeal for unity in the Church, is I believe calling us to learn from each other, including learning from those with whom I disagree. I know that's risky, because it means I might be changed. And that might lead some to be tempted to separate ourselves from those people with whom we disagree, so we don't have to listen to them. But that really does fly in the face of the unity to which we are called. If we cut ourselves off from those with whom we disagree, then we cut ourselves off from what God has to give us through those other people, by embracing dialogue, listening, listening to each other in love. Now I know there's an immense cost to that unity which brings differences together in Christ.; it's painful. It means we are called to live together with our brothers and sisters in Christ, even with those who we believe are in sin. But that is what we are called to do. Because the New Testament teaches us that the unity of the Church, although painful, is life-giving. Disunity, separation, schism is easy; it's a cop-out; it's a luxury; but it's really death. The *pain* of unity is really life - living our differences together is abundant life, new abundant life.

Let's think for a moment about marriage - including those other close intimate relationships, and the community that we experience within marriage. For better, for worse. And that's more than simply saying you can't live that close to another person without getting on each other's nerves now and again. We don't marry the other person because we think things will always be good; no, we marry the other precisely because we know there will be times when things are not good. We make the biggest mistakes of our lives in our marriages. Yet it is also there that I have the potential to experience unconditional acceptance of who I am, despite the dumb things I've done; and to experience forgiveness. And that is new life.