

Sunday, June 23rd, 2019, Second Sunday after Pentecost

Readings: 1 Kings 19:1-4,8-15a, Psalm 42, Galatians 3:23-29, Luke 8:26-39

Dancing with God...On Giant's Shoulders

Introduction

These last weeks we have learnt something which apparently has been new for many of you: that Christians are not simply people who claim the forgiveness of God through Jesus Christ, but that having claimed it, having laid hold of it, we are invited to be new people, to become partners with God: what the Scriptural tradition refers to as co-creators with God. In other words, the Christian life is a vocation, a creative vocation, a vocation characterized by hope, confidence, and expectation. The Christian life is an adventure.

That was certainly the feeling of the Christian Church, 39 years ago, when I was ordained in the newly inaugurated Uniting Church in Australia. A decade before its inauguration, the Roman Catholic Church through the Council of Vatican II, had undergone a dramatic rejuvenation, called *aggiornamento* or "opening up". It flung open its windows and doors, shook out the smelly bed-clothing, renounced the old stifling idea that the church knew better about everything, and began to look at the world more, imaginatively, open-mindedly. The Catholic Church began to dance *with* the world, rather than issue edicts, anathemas *against* it. It was that mood of hope, confidence and expectation, established by Vatican II, that in large part, explains, I think, the founding of the Uniting Church. Its Statement to the Nation reflected and refracted that idea of Christians as co-creators with God in the world.

We affirm our eagerness to uphold basic Christian values and principles, such as the importance of every human being, the need for integrity in public life, the proclamation of truth and justice, the rights for each citizen to participate in decision-making in the community, religious liberty and personal dignity, and a concern for the welfare of the whole human race.

But how the mood has changed! The Christian Church is on the defensive, limping. Our film clip this morning, depicts this change. The Reverend Adam Smallbone is the vicar of St Saviour's Hackney, an urban area of London. He is cornered, embattled, beset, at every point by the complexity of his community: the pervasiveness of the secular; the reality of multi-culturalism and the over-whelming religious supermarket that it brings; and even the battle with the conservative evangelical Christians – narrow, but successful in their chosen territory of young, professional Caucasians/whites. For Adam, hope, confidence and expectation, the idea of being co-creators with God, is but a dream. He climbs the hill, his Cavalry, bearing his cross, to Faure's *Pie Jesu – Have mercy Lord*. He breaks into a song of pained praise of Jesus, a song that comforts, but at the same time confirms his sense of failure, as his faith dwindles, wilts "I danced for the scribe and the Pharisee but they would not dance, no wouldn't follow me..." And then there appears a very ordinary guy, a guy from the streets. After offering incoherent advice, this street guy calls Adam by name, and promises to be always with him. The light breaks through. Adam is transformed, transfigured by Jesus' presence. Adam is re-energised, free again to dream, to stand on giant's shoulders, to stand on God's shoulders and look ahead, to see further than ever before. "Dance then wherever you may be..." But the facts have not changed, the objective reality is still there...to be responded to. What has changed is Adam's way of seeing things. He has become less defensive, ready again to have a shot at partnering with God.

Readings

Let us turn to the readings this morning: to one in particular, the Hebrew reading, the reading that concerns the prophet Elijah: but let's first understand the context: what has gone before. Elijah is nothing if not a warrior: a religious warrior, a cultural warrior. In fact, he has made his reputation upon his holy war for the Hebrew God, Yahweh, (Jehovah) against the old Canaanite Empire's deity, Baal. Just prior to our reading this morning, Elijah has won the Divine-Power Contest, the religious war, the cultural war, with Yahweh, rising to the occasion and successfully incinerating a sacrificial bull. In addition to winning the contest, Elijah, takes his victory to mean that he has licence to murder Baal's priests: 450 of them. There is a horrendous blood-letting.

But now, Elijah finds himself carried into the desert, a hike to Mt Horeb where Moses had had a talk to God years before. Once there, Elijah hides in a cave, disillusioned and exhausted by all the bloodshed he had unleashed, but also a tad fearful that Jezebel, the wife of King Ahab, had him marked was after him. We read on that God comes to find Elijah in the cave. and in the conversation, Elijah justifies his violence, by assuring God, that he Elijah, is the only one who takes Him seriously: "I have been zealous for you" he somewhat self-righteously repeats. But then...and here the story becomes interesting...God then orders Elijah out of the cave, telling him he is to pass by. You may know the story: first comes a mighty wind which rends the mountains and breaks the rocks in pieces, but the Lord was not in the wind. Then comes an earthquake, but the Lord was not in the earthquake, and then comes a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire. After the fire there comes a still small voice.

What is this story about? What is the theology? It is about the un-doing of Elijah, the de-construction of his theology, even as he sees himself, prides himself as God's defender of the faith. This story, this theology, is about how Elijah learns something else: that God is not necessarily where you think He is. In fact, rather than being zealous about a God of power, Elijah is being taught to be zealous about its obverse, its opposite: *a still small voice*. But, let's go further: what does this still, small vice suggest, connote? It is God's voice, Yahweh's voice, speaking to the conscience of his people, calling 'time out' to religious and cultural wars. This story, this theology is about God's dance with and sympathy for all human beings, especially the victims, even the prophets of Baal, who have just been massacred. This story, this theology is ultimately about God's generous opening-up to the world... and this in an ancient, tribal landscape...even there...even then.

Our Modern Reality

Let's apply this Biblical insight to the reality that the Christian Church is in today. Let me explain!

The point of the theology of the story of Elijah and the "still small voice of God", is that God has moved on, God is somewhere else, God has assumed another way of being, of relating. God is no longer the Champion of religious and cultural identity and the violence that ensues. God is bigger, God is broader than Elijah's notions.

In keeping with Elijah's painful lesson of the changing, broader mind of God in changing times, I confess my own concern, my own discomfort with the increasing tendency of contemporary Christianity, to retreat into itself, to become defensive, to depict the secular as the enemy. I understand that we live in puzzling times, confusing times, where much of what has been taken for granted, no longer remains centre-stage. In times like these, people withdraw to their "tribes", including their religious ones. But that is precisely the worst thing to do, although it is understandable why people, Christians included, do it. It is in times like ours, that the Christian Church should resist becoming just another tribe among many. It is in times like ours, that we Christians, need to examine and re-examine what Jesus Christ is saying to us. And the way to do that, is to maintain an open-mind to the changing realities we experience. The way to do that, is to live amid the confusion with grace, to stand on Giant's shoulders, on Jesus' shoulders, endeavouring to see further ahead, rather than to look backward. After all, the likelihood is that God has moved on, and we may have been left behind: a museum piece.

This is the strength of the Uniting Church in Australia. It has many faults...I have lived with it for 40 years...for me it has been a marriage of mixed feelings. But...it is a denomination of intellectual depth courage, which seeks to be one of God's partners, co-creator with our brother, Jesus Christ.