

SPG#220, Pentecost 23B, Proper 27

Rev. Charles Pope

November 8, 2009

1 Kings 17:8-16

Hebrews 9:24-28

Mark 12:38-44

Our delegates have just returned from the diocesan convention which ran Friday and Saturday. Overall I would say it was not a remarkable convention. Diocesan business was conducted more or less efficiently. Episcopalians argued over some fine points of order like they usually do. Controversy was at a minimum. The budget presentation reflected the diminishing resources in the diocese as well as the economic downturn.

I was reminded of our situation here where we have many marvelous plans but are uncertain if we have the resources to carry out the plans. So there is at least the hint of us needing to face our own limitations, and the hint that we must face the possibility, if not the reality, of scarcity. At the diocesan level, personnel are more forthright in saying that there truly is scarcity.

Into this world comes today's Old Testament reading from 1 Kings where we find the prophet Elijah. The story of Elijah in the history of Judaism is very prominent and couched in miracles. Elijah hailed from the 9th century BC. On one occasion he was fed by angels on the road to Horeb. On another he was transported to heaven in a chariot of fire. On another occasion Elijah struck the water of the Jordan River with his staff, and it parted.

Just prior to today's reading from 1 Kings, in a time of drought, Elijah is waiting out the drought by a stream called Cherith. While he is waiting he drinks from the stream and reportedly is fed by ravens in the mornings and the evenings. Each time the ravens bring him bread and meat.

So just to say that Elijah is part of today's reading is not enough. We must have some appreciation of this miraculous and dramatic figure as presented in scripture.

When Elijah was present, there was always an anticipation of something miraculous.

In addition Elijah was a prophet who was unafraid of authorities. Many times he confronts King Ahab of Israel. Often he is presented as a prophet in contrast to other prophets, specifically the prophets of Baal. Finally he has been revered in Judaism as the one who would announce the "Coming Day of the Lord." John the Baptizer was seen in the New Testament as one who had inherited this role of announcing through Elijah.

So the presence of Elijah in any story gives one pause to think at the outset.

In today's story we find Elijah on his way to Zarephath from the stream called Cherith, just east of the Jordan River. As I said before he had been living there while being fed by ravens. So at the beginning there is the indication of Elijah's hunger and thirst in a time of drought. God tells Elijah to go to Zarephath where he says **a widow will feed you.**

When he got there he found a woman gathering sticks. Elijah called her and asked that she give him water to drink. As she turned to get the water he asked that she also get him something to eat.

Her response, **As the Lord your God lives, I have nothing baked, only a handful of meal in a jar, and a little oil in a jug; I am now gathering a couple of sticks, so that I may go home and prepare it for myself and my son, that we may eat it and die.**

In other words she and her son were at the point of starvation. The jar of meal and the jug of oil she had planned as their last meal. So, at this point, there is not only the indication of thirst and hunger among all three of them, but there is the indication of Desperation, starvation, and impending death with the widow and her son. There is a sense that the widow knew who Elijah was, and knew that he was a miraculous figure. And there is every indication that Elijah knew this woman as the widow of whom God had spoken.

She may even have been afraid that Elijah would insist that she give the meal and the oil to him. Because he responds to her and says, **Do not be afraid.**

And then he tells her to make him a cake from the meal. And when she has given that to him, she is to make food for herself and her son. Elijah says that the oil and the meal will be continually replenished until there is rain. The story ends by saying she and her household ate from the jar of meal and jug of oil for many days.

So the story is about a spiritual/miraculous man and a starving widow, who even in facing death, was willing to give all that she had. And in the coming together of this miraculously spiritual man and the radical sacrifice of the widow, a miracle occurs.

Where they had faced the last of their food, they faced plenty. Where they had faced starvation, it was reversed. Where they had faced death, there was life.

The story could have been just about Elijah and his magical powers. The story could have been about Elijah miraculously producing food before the widow had done anything. But her sacrifice, her gift in the face of death is carefully recorded.

And so the story is very carefully about both, about Elijah and who he was, and about the widow and her act.

We could ask, "What if the widow had tried to negotiate? What if she had said, 'I tell you what. I will make my son and me a cake. You can have what is left over. How about that?'" Or she could have said, "Let me think about this for a while."

But none of that occurred, and none of it is recorded. And so we are left with the conclusion that it was not just what she gave, but how she gave it that was so special, and particularly in a time of desperation.

In the context of our own spiritual lives, the implications are provocative.

As we encounter that which is most spiritual in our lives. As we live out our lives in Christ, when we come face to face with an invitation or a possibility of giving, how will we be found? Or more specifically, how will we respond in a time of possible scarcity?

A question to ponder: Are we to draw from this story that we are to give all that we have to religion, to the church? As much as that is a possibility, I think that is not the main point. The main point is the spirituality of giving that emanates from this story. So the question for each of us is what is the nature of our own spirituality of giving? In our encounter with the holy, what is the nature of our response? Only the individual can answer that.

This is a deeply personal story with deeply personal implications.

The story of Elijah and the widow is a call to give from the heart, whatever the gift.

Somehow in the mix between the holy and the gift, whatever it is, there is a blessing.

And the gift is transformed into something more than it originally was. That is how, sometimes when a gift is given, whether it be time, talent, or treasure, if it is from the heart, the gift becomes more than it originally was. It is blessed into something more.

So the church is not just built on good deeds and money. The church is built on the spirituality of giving in Christ. It is built on the mix between the holy and the heartfelt gift.

May the spirituality of Elijah and the widow seep into our hearts and magnify all our heartfelt gifts. Amen.