

Second Sunday after Pentecost  
Year C - 29/5/2016

1 Kings 18:20-39  
Psalm 96  
Galatians 1:1-12  
Luke 7:1-10

**In the name of the Trinity; Creator, Redeemer, and Life-Giver...**

I was having a really interesting discussion with my Supervisor the other day. We had both been in attendance at the Ministry Conference the day before, and had heard our Archbishop give a sermon which included, among other things, the comment that we as church are called to tell a story. No, he didn't mean like the sort of bedtime stories I read to my kids most nights, but rather that we are charged to offer to the world an alternative narrative to the one that is predominant currently.

The Archbishop posited that many people in the world had fallen for the dominant narrative which says that we live in an era where most people don't really care much for each other; that in a very negative way they believe the world offers them little, and so as a result they have to fill up this empty life with all sorts of things and activities in order to kind of have any meaning in their life at all.

Now, I am probably simplifying his words a little, but I think I agree with his idea - I can certainly think of many people that I know personally and others who I know by reputation who do seem so intent on filling up their life with all sorts of "stuff" (including material things as well as countless activities), seemingly just to escape having to think very hard about what we might understand as the meaning of life. And for most of these people, any sort of narrative that includes a sense of God and a knowledge of how Jesus might fit into their life is just non-existent.

So there were Jonathan, my Supervisor, and I talking about this. And in agreeing with this point, he told the story of a remarkable woman who he had met recently. She was an indigenous woman, raised on a semi-remote community in

the Northern Territory. After leaving there, she met and later married a Chinese National man. And now, in her mid thirties, she has just converted to Islam, and as part of her faith works as a Spiritual Practitioner.

Now, Jonathan's point was this: people who meet this lady are confused - they find it hard, often, to relate to her, because she doesn't fit an easy narrative. People **can't** look at her and easily say - "oh, she is an indigenous woman - I know something of that story (whether it be a good or bad judgment that so many people carry with them of these people). They cannot look at her as she walks around with her husband and understand her based on the fact that she is married to a Chinese man, with all of the connotations that this race of people might elicit. And she *certainly* doesn't look like your typical Muslim!

This woman does not offer an easy narrative for people to "read" and "hear" as they encounter her. And I would want to say two things about that today:

Firstly, the narrative that we bring as Christians is not always an easy one for people to hear and understand either. And secondly, we are reminded in our Gospel passage today that we judge people based simply on the narrative that we have chosen to believe in at our peril.

To the second point initially. I am conscious, in my own life, of the number of times where I am tempted to reduce the person in front of me to a sort of lowest common denominator. It's actually easier that way. "Oh that person votes Green - I know what *that* sort of person is like!" Or, "she lives in Frankston, I'll bet she has a lot of mates who are on the dole." Or, "he worships at St. Hilary's Kew, and we all know what *they* are like??" (and by the way, don't worry, people will be making the same sort of assumptions about us, too, depending on who we vote for or where we live or where we go to church...)!

But do you see - I am not giving myself a chance to hear their story, to understand their narrative, before I make a judgment.

Today we hear of what I would have to say is a most unlikely healing story. Let's break down exactly why I say that. How unlikely a character this centurion is to demonstrate faith. He is, after all, a Roman centurion and we don't typically look to soldiers for examples of piety.

He is also unexpected. Even Jesus himself is rather taken aback by the centurion's confidence in him; indeed, Luke describes him as being amazed. "Not even in Israel have I found such faith," Jesus says in response to the message sent from the centurion. I suspect it wasn't only Jesus who was amazed. After all, Luke's original readers hear this story thirty or forty years after the events narrated took place, and one thing that hadn't changed across those decades was that Rome was still in charge, still occupying Israel, still enforcing its will upon Israelites of all ranks and stations. Which means that this centurion is used to giving orders in the Roman army and having those orders obeyed. He is, then, one of those directly responsible for Israel's oppression.

But this story is shared by several of the Evangelists. Why? I think it might just be a reminder to us that just because this man is in the Roman legion it doesn't mean that he is incapable of doing good. Clearly he already has. Indeed, the Jewish leaders in his town commend him to Jesus. Further, given that he was well acquainted with these leaders, should we be surprised that he has heard of Jesus and is therefore eager to beseech him on behalf of his servant?

All of which means he is more complex than perhaps many of his day or ours want to make him out. He is a Roman centurion **and** a man who does good for those in his community. He is part of the force occupying and oppressing Israel **and** he builds synagogues for the townspeople under his authority. This passage reminds us that we should never reduce someone to one attribute or judge someone based on one element of who they are.

Pope Francis once said during a homily that all people are redeemed by Christ's sacrifice and invited his hearers to meet all people, whether they believe or not,

at the place of doing good works. The fact that he included atheists among those who are redeemed by Christ and invited to do good works shocked many. But perhaps what we should be surprised at is not that unlikely and unexpected people demonstrate faith and do good works, but that we consider them unlikely and unexpected in the first place.

And so, to our narrative - that story which we tell the world. It is clear that it will not be a popular story - not a best-seller. And yet, I believe, we do have something to say. I believe that our story, when joined with God's creative and redemptive story, is one which needs to be heard. After all, for people in their daily lives to know and understand that they are worth something, simply because of their status as God's created children, must surely be good news.

And for people to know that there is so much more to life than simply living and dying would in many ways transform their lives, and in turn the world. Yes, our story means something, and needs to be told. As the Roman Centurion discovered in this morning's Gospel, God's power extends and pervades the forces of sickness and brokenness and even death - and that is good news.

So as we tell our story, let us also pray for those we know of who do not share our faith - that God would use them to do God's will in the world (even if they wouldn't call it that), and pray that we would have the grace and courage to commend their good works and share with them our gratitude for them and our faith that God loves and uses them?

And might we also pray that we might be less surprised that God uses people we have decided are unexpected or unlikely to do wonderful things? That God would open our hearts and eyes to see that God's love, will, and work extends far beyond the confines of our church or faith and that the God who showed up in the man crucified on a cross regularly shows up where we don't expect God to be and never, ever stops delighting in surprising us? The Lord be with you.