

Third Sunday after Pentecost
Year C - 5/6/2016

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

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

I wonder what you think of when I say the word “Prophet”. Does your mind automatically think of those shadowy Old Testament figures. Or do you imagine the sort of late night or early morning American TV Evangelist shows, where Benny Hinn or Oral Roberts or similar get up and prophesy about people in their audience!! Well, actually, I found a really useful definition of a prophet the other day. Rev. Rob Whalley, now ministering in Wangaratta Diocese, wrote this when he was talking about Thomas Merton, whom he considers to be a Prophet:

“For me, Merton is a prophet, one of those times in the history of the church when the windows open and old ideas get blown away with a fresh spirit of renewed understandings and possibilities.” I like that...

Why do I mention this? Our readings today focus on two prophets. Firstly, we encounter the Old Testament prophet, Elijah. Now Elijah has been cast out of the city by King Ahab. As he survives in the wilderness a drought ravages the region. He receives word from God to go to Zarephath, and to find a widow who will feed him.

As we hear, this widow Elijah discovers is just preparing what she believes will be her final meal, before she and her son die from starvation. Upon Elijah’s request, however, she finds the faith to use some of her final supplies to bake an oatmeal cake for Elijah. Then, by God’s grace and provision, they miraculously discover that the oil and the meal become a never-ending supply of food for the household, until God sends more rain to water the earth.

Then, in our Gospel reading we hear of Jesus being hailed as the great prophet that he is, in response to the miracle of the raising from the dead in Nain. Again, a story centred around a widow; one on the margins of society in first century Judea, a story of human grief and tragedy, just like the widow of Zarephath.

In both cases, I want you to note the first words of the prophets to the two widows in the stories. When the widow of Zarephath explains to Elijah her predicament, and their lack of food, his words are simple: “do not be afraid”... And Jesus, as he approaches the grieving widow in Nain, says : “do not weep”. The prophets bring, in both cases, words of comfort. But they are not simply human words; they are God’s words.

That is the essence of the Prophet; that he or she brings not human sympathy, or human words or actions to bear upon a situation, but speaks God’s words. It is God who, in both of these stories today, says “do not be afraid”, and “do not weep”. The creator of the earth and all its goodness continues to speak through the prophets over the centuries, bringing light and hope to people in despair and darkness.

Caring for the ones that society wants to leave behind is what God does. Having no edges, no boundaries to the scope of care, is God. God’s very being has no limits to love.

We still live in a world of social divisions. Our society, our now-global society, is full of divisions. Indeed, it feels like we have found many more ways to divide ourselves than could have been imagined by the people of Nain. We can be divided by religion, by ethnicity, by nation, by age, by the kind of music we like, by wealth and poverty. Sadly, we can still be divided by gender.

But amid all this division, God gives us life. God is the source of all being. And God doesn’t just give us biological life, God gives us a full life, a life where our divisions are healed.

That is what Jesus showed the people of Nain and Elijah demonstrated to the widow of Zarapheth, that life means more than simply existing, it means living fully within the web of life. It means being loved by all and loving all.

This is the reign of God. It is a reign of well being, a reign of justice, a reign of abundance, a reign of joyous harmony. It is a reign we recognize when we are fully in God's presence, and when God's presence encompasses all of creation. God's presence has no social boundaries. The crowd at Nain rejoiced because God had looked favorably upon them with a sign of God's reign.

This is the action of our God. Restoring to the social community, bringing people we push out of society back into love because we need each other. This is also our action. We too are called to be healers. The mission of the church, our Book of Common Prayer says, "is to restore all people to unity with God and each other in Christ."

We do this by refusing to draw boundaries, by refusing to exclude people from the fullness of life that God promises. We do it when we welcome all people into our churches. We do it when we work to ensure that all are fed, and clothed, and housed, and cared for when sick. We do it when we work to transform unjust social structures. We do it when we fix any system or practice that treats anyone as undeserving of a full life.

Our mission is to be people who draw no distinctions. Our mission is to be a people who recognize the dignity of every human being.

These stories of restoration and return speak to the delicacy of life and the power of God. We are reminded that God's creation is far from static; rather, it is flexible, open to possibility, and capable of being reborn and used at God's pleasure. These passages also beckon God's people to challenge the given-ness of the world's suffering.

How can Christians be more like Elijah in seeking ways to stretch their own bodies over a world in need of life and hope? How can Christians follow Jesus in embracing the world's great need with hands of compassion and a confession that divine favor has been extended to all in the person of Jesus. May this pair of prophets make prophets of us all! Amen.

The Lord be with you.