



Quiet Day - Parish of Brighton Saturday 28 February 2009

Wilderness Talk 2 – Hot scones in the desert

Elijah said, "It is enough; now O Lord, take away my life, for I am no better than my ancestors". (IKings 18.4)

Here is Elijah on Mount Carmel;
fearless prophet, taunting in arrogance the prophets of Baal,
calling down fire and putting falsehood to the sword on that Mountain,
and in marvellous triumph; then running before the King's chariot back to Jezreel.

But the triumph on Carmel has turned to fear and despair,
as Queen Jezebel vows to have his head.

The great prophet collapses under the broom bush of despair.

"Take my life! I am no better than my ancestors".

He has exerted his best efforts, but in spite of those best efforts, he is now totally exhausted, convinced that he is a failure, no better than those who preceded him.

And in the desert, he is met by an angel, given sustenance and sent on his way to a renewing meeting with God. Elijah is met by the angel of God at the end of his own strength. He is met when he has no reserve, no resource of his own.

Now he must find God, not in strength, but in weakness. Margaret Geunther says that one of the tasks of the middle years is to explore limitations. One of the hard spiritual tasks is to embrace limitation and even failure; beyond knowing and discovering and celebrating our gifts and strengths (that's hard enough!), knowing and accepting what we are not, what we will never be and finding grace about who we really are.

Our driven world comes hard to that place, for we are taught to define ourselves by success and victory, and blessed are you, when you cut the mustard, when you are numbered among the beautiful, when you rise to the top, and even when you are recognised as an extraordinarily competent minister of God.

Blessed are you! Perhaps! But a wilderness and a broom bush and an angel await.

They await, because we must move beyond strength to wholeness. The self that has lived in the shadow of our strengths, the self that has been put aside as we have pursued achievement or place, needs to be found again or we will have no energy for the rest of the journey.

We cannot be sure what it was that brought this man to the broom-bush of despair. What we can be sure of is that this man of strength had to learn the lesson of care. He had to learn the lessons of weakness.

"Suddenly an angel touched him and said to him, "Get up and eat...get up and eat otherwise the journey will be too long" (19.5-7)

Elijah is met by the Angel of God, not in the strength he showed on Carmel but this time in weakness.

In his depression, even in physical weakness, his simple needs are met, with the provision of hot cakes and a jug of water, and a touch of encouragement to get up and eat.

If I was in Elijah's place, having fought the great battles and now collapsed in crisis, I would have expected the angel to come with some metaphysical wonder, some deep insight, some revelation that would light my day.

But the angel brings hot scones and rest!

Too easily we neglect the simple and the physical. They are part of the spiritual life as well. They are part of the balance that we can all too easily lose.

Elijah he had to learn to receive, and be renewed through the tender care of his God, to receive the angel of care, and to partake of the sustenance that God had prepared in the desert.

The Psalmist wrote: Happy are those who, going through the valley of dryness, find there a spring from which to drink! (84.5)

A key to the spiritual life is learning to receive sustenance from God's angels of care. And don't think this is easy for those of us cast in the role of care-givers, whose ego needs are bound up in our role as dispensers of care...giving advice, dispensing comfort, casting out a devil of two, preaching good news for others! It is hard to truly receive care; to receive it with vulnerability and openness.

You probably know the story of the Holy Grail. According to legend Joseph of Arimathea used a chalice to capture the blood of the dying Christ. Later the chalice was taken to England and it became known as the Holy Grail. And legend had it that whoever found the chalice and correctly answered the question, "Who does the Grail serve?" could receive renewal for himself and others.

The castle where the Grail was held was presided over by one called the Grail King, who was known as the wounded Fisher King, because years earlier he had accidentally wounded himself on a fish and it had never healed. The King was ill and could not be cured, nor could he die. And strangely enough although he was the keeper of the Grail, he himself could not be cured by it. In the end, according to the legend, the King is healed when he receives the cup from an uncouth clown.

For each of us to continue whole and be healers, we need to learn to reach out and receive the cup of healing ourselves. Sometimes that cup will be offered by a surprising angel, sometimes it may be offered by those who like Parsifal, we might be tempted to dismiss as foolish.

But we need to be open to the caring angels – the scone cookers in the desert. And we need to develop the spiritual gift of receiving care.

It is not an indulgence; it is viaticum...food for the way.

About a decade ago I had large surgery for cancer. It left me weak and very vulnerable emotionally. There were a number of defining moments, but one I remember well. We decided to across the street from the Rectory to a Chinese Café for dinner. Normally Lindy complains when we walk because I am always striding out and leaving her behind. This night I needed to hold onto the arm of my wife, as I crossed the road near our home, and pride at being able to cope, no matter what, was surrendered to a more gracious moment.

What I had to learn afresh was the grace of receiving.

What Elijah had to learn in the desert was to receive from God, not in strength, but in weakness. This is the spiritual journey. This is the wilderness journey.

Beyond wit and strength, in the desert of failure, under the room bush of exhaustion, the angel waited... for Elijah, for us.

Elijah receives the hotcakes of care, always a sweet and bitter food for those who are used to being strong.

In his weakness he hears that there is a journey yet and a mountain, and that he would be given strength to continue on.

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