

HOLISTIC FAITH

Pentecost 13 – Cycle B: 1 Kings 8:1-6, 10-11, 22-30, 41-43; Eph. 6:10-20; Jn. 6:56-69

Because I haven't had too many weeks away from preaching this summer, the semi-continuous readings in 1 and 2 Samuel and 1 Kings have drawn me into the era of Samuel, Saul, David, and Solomon to a depth I hadn't expected. This morning's reading from 1 Kings is no exception.

When I immerse myself in a well-crafted novel, the world portrayed by the author becomes my world to a degree: my imagination translates me into the book's setting and action. In the same way, this morning's account of the dedication of Solomon's temple was not something that stayed on the page for me. In a blink, I was there among the throng that had gathered in Jerusalem some 3,000 years ago for what must surely be the most glorious civic event to have occurred in the history of the Hebrew people. In scale, the dedication of Israel's first temple appears to have been comparable to the festivities around the opening of the London Olympics this summer, although the temple itself was tiny, if compared with London's Olympic Stadium. But the celebrating in Jerusalem continued for a week, not an evening. And like the Olympics, it was not a sober affair: there may be considerable exaggeration in the account of 1 Kings concerning the high numbers of people and animal sacrifices, but it is clear that it was a feast to end all feasts: everybody in the city ate and drank well, celebrated, danced, and visited with each other; and in traditional corporate liturgies, they worshipped the God who had formed them as a people.

What catches my attention, though, in this transport across the millennia, is how deftly Solomon bridges the gap between the old religion of tent and journey and the new religion of monument and institution. Solomon seems to be aware of the negative theological shift that could occur: the risk of objectifying God; the temptation towards idolatry, that is, identifying God with the magnificence of the temple, rather than the living, interactive presence the people had discovered God to be. Consequently, Solomon interprets the temple for the people simply as a place for prayer and repentance; a place apart where both Jew and Gentile can seek and find communion with the One who is life and salvation.

Even today, when we build places of worship, there is at the heart of our efforts a devotional impulse to have the beauty of art and the drama of architecture lift us to an awareness of the greater truth and reality that is God. It may be that Solomon's corrective is just as appropriate and necessary for us as it was for his original congregation: as much as we need land and location, music and art, costume and drama to express the inexpressible and create a sanctuary in the geography of our lives, we must not worship the work of our own hands; we must not confuse our devotion to God with our love of beauty. Our places apart are for prayer and our focus on the interior life; they are buildings that lift us up by grounding us – in the community that gathers within these buildings to remember and proclaim the One who is life and salvation.

What we are able to see in the wide sweep of Hebrew history is how ordinary people respond to seeking and finding God in their midst. In so many ways, including their love of sacred ritual, their story is our story. The mystery they discerned is the mystery we proclaim. And we are held to one another by our common humanity with all its strengths and foibles, by our faithfulness and our rebellion, by our righteousness and our sinfulness, but most especially by our instinct to turn to God in prayer and repentance.

The author of Ephesians lives in another world. Life in the Spirit is uncertain for this teacher in the early church. Under Roman rule, the environment is hostile for the people of the Way, but the writer suggests that Christians are struggling against the forces of evil present in the world more so than the oppressors themselves. And so, this Pauline scribe urges his readers to use the gift of faith in Christ Jesus as a way of being in, but not of the world. The author may be being intentionally vague concerning the opposition to the early church so as not to have trouble, should his letter fall into Roman hands; but it is clear he or she interprets the Christian life as a battle of Christians on the side of good with the uncertain world tending towards evil. Vestiges of this world view remain in our baptismal liturgy when we ask parents and sponsors of the baptized to renounce evil. It may seem spooky to speak of the lurking presence of evil with such conviction, but no one can deny its place in human experience. We rightly praise God for the beauty of the earth, but the beauty is so fragile in the face of evil. The author of Ephesians counsels those who follow Jesus to engage in remediating our broken world. Put on the whole armour of God for

protection: the belt of truth to repel falsehood; the breastplate of righteousness to protect our hearts from sin; shoes that will proclaim peace wherever we walk; faith to shield us from suggestions of God's absence; the helmet of salvation to defend us from suggestions of the futility of life's struggles. And then, dressed for battle, we use the word of God as our sword to win the day against evil, against oppression, against poverty, against greed, against racism and sectarianism, against bigotry, against hate, against indifference.

One of the unanticipated consequences of having so much information at our fingertips, as a result of the huge leaps forward in information technology, is information overload; our feeling overwhelmed by wave upon wave of news washing into our consciousness each day, sometimes several times a day. Everything, it seems, is relativized, and it is so easy for us to disengage. Here is the author of the Ephesians speaking to us, urging us, not to succumb: sign petitions; join Kitchener-Waterloo's new Common Front in the war against poverty; write letters to the editor of the Waterloo Region Record to improve the level of public discourse on important issues; join the letter-writing campaigns of Amnesty International; support Kairos; advocate for those who are vulnerable and have neither voice nor influence in society; in the world.

"Come out of the temple," the author of the Ephesians calls. "Let your prayer and repentance, lead you to action. Our God is the God of tent and journey, not monument and institution."

Jesus offends people, we read in today's Gospel. In our English translation of the Greek original, the disciples tell Jesus his call to them to eat his flesh and drink his blood is difficult. The word is actually "offensive." And so it is on many levels, not the least of which is the prohibition in the book of Leviticus concerning drinking the blood of animals. Other religions did it as part of their sacrifice rituals, but it was anathema to the Jews.

Are we surprised that Jesus offends people – even his own disciples? My guess is that the author of Ephesians had it right when the word of God becomes the sword in the whole armour of God metaphor. Jesus, the embodied word of God, cuts away with surgical precision anything that misrepresents the gospel. And in this culmination of his long sermon on bread, he is essentially calling for the gospel's priority over traditional interpretation of the law. "Eat my flesh and drink my blood" is the ultimate invitation to join in his proclamation of a faith that challenges, offends, and rejects the *status quo*. When we are baptized into Christ Jesus, when we have Holy Communion with Christ Jesus, we receive the promised spirit and life; but we also receive his capacity to offend. I have always marvelled at the notion of Christian unity when we read Jesus' manifesto in Matthew 10, "Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword. For I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law; and one's foes will be members of one's own household." And, of course, he goes on; but the message is that our call in Christ Jesus, our baptism, our communion with Christ, is a radical call that enlists us to his cause of bringing near the reign of God; turning the world upside down so that sacrificial love, not self-love, will determine our actions, how we live, the choices we make, the causes we support. Conflict is a given, because human nature resists change, and the gospel of Jesus Christ is all about change and transformation. Not only that, but Jesus leaves no stone unturned: just when we think we've made a decision for Christ, he calls us to go deeper. Our transformation as individual Christians and as church is never over. The word of God is life and spirit, and it is always working – always alive and always animating. We can never call ourselves saved, because this side of heaven the word of God never gives us a moment's peace. We are works-in-progress, as is the world into which we are called to be people for others.

In today's three readings, before our very eyes, as it were, faith becomes three-dimensional. We find it easy to identify with the people who gather at the dedication of Solomon's temple: in many ways, it established the pattern for the corporate worship we enjoy each Sunday. We gather to receive the nurture of word and sacrament as part of a long tradition that preceded Christianity. The author of Ephesians calls us into action: we must not stay in the temple, but put our faith into practice; allow it to engage with the world around us, which, we learn, is an hostile environment. Jesus takes us into a fuller understanding of who we are and whose we are: in union with him and his proclamation, we are not

merely to worship God or put God into practice; we are to embody God. Nurtured by spirit and life, we are to become spirit and life; we are to offend and challenge and change our environment until earth begins to resemble heaven. Jesus takes us to the next level.