

Sermon Sunday 6th June 2010

My Dear Friends,

What can I say to you that is nourishing, affirming, encouraging, challenging?.

I have been distressed over the past few weeks with the number of conversations I've had with people who are stressed, overworked, or just surviving.

I am wondering how I as you priest, and we as your community at Holy Covenant can support

you....clear space for you, love you, help you to rest if that's what you need: facilitate your growth in wholeness.

In 1 Kings chapter 17, 8-24, we read of a widow, just surviving, and preparing to die. And we meet a man named Elijah, a man who has travelled far. Jan Sutch Pickard, (2002, This is the Day, Wild goose publications, Glasgow. In Seasons of the Spirit, Congregational life, Pentecost 1, P 27)., reflects on this in a piece entitled Encounter:

Encounter

Here is a man
on a journey –
needing somewhere to lay his head,
thirsty, hungry.
Here is a woman
on her home ground –
picking up sticks
wary of strangers.

Both of them are living in a dry land
where a little water, a handful of meal
need to go a long way.

One has a household to feed,
the other has only himself to keep
going
through the wilderness,
until God lets him know why.
He is travelling in faith,
she has given up hope.

A coping woman
she has now come to the end
of her resources –
just this last ration of meal,
just this trickle of oil –
not much more water,
sticks for the last fire –
just these embers of courage –
she is burnt out.

He is not sure why he is here,
except that God pointed him this way –
to take the food out of the mouths
of this hungry family?

To walk away? Or to watch him die?
What can he do that will change anything?

But she offers him welcome
and he offers encouragement –
and they go on from there...

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Both of them are living in a dry land where a little water, a handful of meal, need to go a long way. One has a household to feed, the other has only himself to keep going through the wilderness, until God lets him know why. He is travelling in faith, she has given up hope. A coping woman, she has now come to the end of her resources. Just this last ration of meal, just this trickle of oil – not much more water, sticks for the last fire – just these embers of courage – she is burnt out.

He is not sure why he is here, except that God pointed him this way – to take the food out of the mouths of this hungry family?. To walk away, or to watch Him die? What can he do that will change anything?

But she offers him welcome, and he offers encouragement – and they go on from there.....

Have you seen the TV show, 'Thank God you're Here' ? In the programme, the stage is set: a difficult situation is about to unfold: an actor walks into the scene, unprepared, 'Thank God you're here' say those in the scene, and begin to describe the drastic situation they are facing. The one who has just walked in, has to improvise like crazy..... It seems our God is an improvising god, improvising in the moment, making do with the situation. ...

The widow in this story knows nothing about what's in store. She's just getting on with life, and in the midst of the ordinary, the extraordinary breaks in...

She might tell her story like this:

I was just going about my business, at my wits end, and starving, I was without hope, preparing to die, when he came, and asked for a drink and for food.

What could I do, but be honest and answer his request. There was something in his trust, his calm, his reaching out, his conviction that God would provide, that made me respond, kindled a tiny spark of hope, that all would be well, despite the evidence.....and it was....and we shared food, and companionship, and faith...until, my son died.

It seemed such a cruel joke, to let me live again, and then for him to die!

But here too I was wrong. Here too I was called to trust. How hard was that? He lay on him, breathed on him, took the disease, shared his breath, his hope, and my child lived!

Oh, wretched woman that I am....my child lives...I cannot contain myself. I hug that skinny man of God. The child does too, clinging to his leg. Tears and smiles mingle. He is alive! Let's celebrate! And hope is deep, faith is deep – faith tested to the limits

And Elijah might say: He, God, calls me away, out of Ahab's territory. Why, I do not know. To die in the wilderness? To rely on a poor widow? To trust in God?

She catches my eye. She is so thin, but determined, busy collecting sticks. I watch her a while. She is very focussed. I asked her for water, and she obligingly went on her way to fetch it. Then, pressing my luck, I asked for food.

This nearly broke her:

“I have nothing baked and only a handful of meal in a jar and a little oil in a jug. I am now gathering sticks, so that I may go home and prepare it for myself and my son, that we may eat it and die. (Ki 17:12).

My heart almost broke.

‘Why have you brought me here God? ‘Don’t be afraid. All will be well’ God seemed to reply.

I spoke out to her, hoping against hope – faith stretched taut, but isn’t this why I am here?...and God is faithful, and god was!....and we all grew in strength, in this miracle of compassion, and generosity, and hope, until her son, weakened by famine grew ill.

What was I to do? I had grown so fond of him. I pleaded with God, ‘Let life come into him again’with my very soul I cried out, and praise God,..... he lived! – wonderful news ! God is good!

So I ask:

What is the intersection between God’s presence and care, and human ministry in this story of a widow and her son and a prophet named Elijah.?

Bishop Frederico Pagura, of Argentina wrote these words in a song of blessing for a meal: “Give bread to those who are hungry, and hunger for justice to those who are fed”. (Seasons of The Spirit)

What courageous compassion the widow showed when she fed the man of God. Bread made from her last flour and oil.

....She offers him welcome

...and he offers encouragement

...and they go on from there.... (Sutch Pickard)

I would suggest that like the widow and Elijah, and Jesus, we are called to courageous compassion in the name of God. I wonder, when have you experienced God leading you to unexpected places?

And what acts of compassion did you give and receive on the way (seasons of the spirit).

Many of you will know that I was working as a massage therapist, and leading interplay, and quiet days and retreats, when the position came up at Holy covenant almost 5 years ago.

Unexpectedly, God called me here, back to Parish ministry. So many acts of compassion have nourished and sustained me here. Your genuine love and concern of my wellbeing, and the wellbeing of others, the work of the Prayer vine, and the pastoral care team.

The resources team in caring for our church and facilitating our renovation.

People’s willingness to be involved in cleaning, morning tea, casserole bank, breathing space, welcoming....there is incredible support and understanding, compassion and generosity here.

Interplay also nourishes me, as do quiet days, and worship with you –

And our amazing God, working through the ordinary, and the every day....

A friend rings

Someone sends an encouraging E-mail

Nikolai affirms

I am sustained, nourished, affirmed and challenged to the limit. I am Alive!

In my journal on Wednesday morning, I wrote this prayer.

Dear God, I am incredibly fortunate to be meeting so many challenges, to have such demanding work, to be with so many people. I am thankful of your outstanding generosity to me, and for your love and support. Help me to follow in your footsteps.....to listen to my heart, to my gut, to my head – to your spirit, whispering into the depths of my being. Give me rest tomorrow (my day off). I pray for strength and focus for today.

I love you, Thank you,

Susanna.

In Fridays Canberra times there was a cartoon.....

THANK GOD YOU'RE HERE!

THANK GOD!