

20 Pentecost; Proper 23c RCL 10 October 2010 Bob Partlow

For the first eight years of my life I had only one brother, Jim, who was four years older.

From about 1944 to 1948, Jim and I spent every summer at our maternal grandparent's very rustic cabin on the St. Mary's River on the Canadian border of Michigan. By rustic I mean we had to pump the water by hand and the "Necessary room" was a true out-house. We had electricity but only for lights and a radio. My Grandmother cooked on a four-burner kerosene stove (they called it "coal oil"). We had no refrigerator. She baked in a dutch-oven placed on the kerosene stove.... and could she ever bake: all the breads, shortcake and strawberry-rhubarb pie to die for. Lunch and dinner every day was fish caught out of the ice-cold river...every day and we never got tired of it. It was a boy's heaven. The rest of the year, Jim and I would tell each other stories and dream about the next summer in "Michigan"...to this day the word "Michigan" brings back such deep memories and longings. When Jim died suddenly and unexpectedly 12 years ago; my biggest personal sense of loss was that now there was no other living soul who knew the magic story of "Michigan".

In Biblical terms the equivalent of "Michigan" is "Jerusalem". A once and future place of peace and joy. In literature and drama it is perhaps called *Camelot* or *Brigadoon*.

The Biblical sense of loss, longing and hope has roots in the experience of the captivity and exile of the Jews from Jerusalem to Babylon. Our reading today from Jeremiah (29:1,4-7) is from this period. The sense of longing and loss is wonderfully expressed in Psalm 137 "By the waters of Babylon we sat down and wept...". It also contains the woeful plea "How can we sing the Lord's song upon an alien soil". To this day the Passover Seder meal ends with the words "Next year in Jerusalem". But we have the same imagery and longing in Christianity. In John

of Patmos ecstatic vision, which we call his “Revelation”, John saw a “new Jerusalem” coming down from heaven.....a shining perfect world to replace the existing tarnished and broken world that we know. Hymn 620 expresses our longing for a better world:

“Jerusalem my happy home when shall I come to thee? When shall my sorrows have an end? Thy joys when shall I see?”

Hymn 597 Set to the tune “Jerusalem” also has wonderful modern longing words composed by Carl Daw....it is a Hymn we intend to introduce.

So clearly, one gets the sense that just like my “Michigan” and King Arthur’s Camelot there is a universal human longing for a new reality, a time and place of peace, balance, justice and satisfaction. Jesus took this common human dream one giant step further, he said it is real. It is not just a dream or a memory seen through rose colored glasses but it is real and coming to fruition among you...he called it ***The Kingdom of God***. Not just a longed for dream or memory but a real possibility in our midst. Jesus only real message was about the Kingdom of God that is at hand and in our very midst and most importantly he lived his life as it is lived in that kingdom.....and Jesus said “come, follow me, follow my way”. The earliest name of what we call the church today was “The People of the Way”. Today we tend to identify denominations by their doctrines and beliefs....but the original idea was that we be people of faith who followed Jesus way! We have traded faith for belief in doctrine and are the poorer for it. We need to get back to being followers of Jesus way.....not defenders of creeds and traditions.

In faith we believe that the Kingdom of God will come “on earth as it is in heaven”. But words like “9-11”; genocide; starvation; and child rape and many others make it clear that we are not there yet. So as faithful followers of Jesus Christ, how do we live believing that the Kingdom will come but knowing full well that it is not yet here? Jeremiah tells the Jews in exile to “go with the flow”,

“bloom where planted”...but if our reading went further we would also be admonished not to listen to the prophets in this strange land. The prophets in this not-yet kingdom land we live in would have us believe:

- That the one who dies with the most toys wins.
- That their only way to respond to violence is with repeating cycles of violence.
- That there is not enough to go around so some must starve and some babies must die for lack of clean water or simple medicines.
- That we must fear anyone who is different from us...by race or religion or national origin.

Israel in captivity was not afraid to adjust to the ways of the land where they were held..but they were very afraid of losing their knowledge of the ways of God. They were not to withdraw from the world, but they were also not to lose their faith.

But, faith is borne by story and there are frightening signs that our corporate knowledge of the story that constitutes our faith is fading from memory. In this weeks e-news I included a link to a report from the Pew Foundation about the appalling lack of religious knowledge among us...especially Mainline Christians...we rank below atheists and agnostics....we scored barely above those who say they are “nothing in particular”---! If we do not know our story, we are left with our culture’s story. Without our story we are left to “Weep by the waters of Babylon”. Ruth and I are trying to offer a variety of educational and formation opportunities, but only you can respond.

The other concern that I have about our collective religious ignorance is our lack of knowledge about other world religions. I may be a heretic but I believe that when the Kingdom of God that Jesus tried to teach us about is fully revealed to us,

we will open our eyes and see that we are not the only ones in God's eternal Kingdom. The leper healed in the Gospel story was in fact a Samaritan. As it is now, fear and ignorance is setting the world's religions at each other's throats...the Kingdom will never come in this way.

The other ways that I believe that today's lessons call us to live as we await the coming of the Kingdom is with thankfulness and generosity. The key to the Samaritan's healing was his thankfulness! He may not have believed what the right believing Jews wanted him to believe but he was thankful! Again faith triumphs over belief.

I watch little TV, mostly sports, news and public TV. Last Sunday I was struck by a 60 Minutes interview with Bill and Melinda Gates and a Public TV program on folk singer Pete Seeger. Seeger is a Unitarian Universalist and I have no idea what faith the Gates may profess. But I would say that the all are deeply engaged in this Babylon world in which we live and that they live very thankful and generous lives. If we are to call ourselves followers of "The Way", we to must be engaged, generous, and thankful...and we must know our story that makes us that way.

We have invited any of you who will to share a one minute statement of why you are thankful and feel generous in the coming weeks....if you will,it can strengthen us all.