

WHAT'S THE BIG IDEA?, Pentecost, 2010
 John 14: 8-17; 25-27 "show us the father"

May 23, 2010

INTRO TO SCRIPTURE

- Lillian told the children this morning the story of Pentecost according to Luke: We heard how the church was born through wind, fire, miracles of speaking other languages, how the Spirit brought together people from different backgrounds and cultures.
- and the disciples received supernatural power, to spread the gospel
- John's version of Pentecost is somewhat gentler, but tells the same story-Jesus appears to the disciples, who are cowering in fear behind locked doors, and he breathes Holy Spirit into them.
- This is also in order to bring people together, Jesus says that the Holy Spirit empowers them to forgive.
- Today's reading backs up a bit in time- to before Jesus dies. It's part of what is called "Jesus' farewell discourse." In it we discover the purpose of sending the Holy Spirit.
- Jesus is going to the Father, but his disciples are to continue his work, and the Holy Spirit is to be their advocate, their helper.

Let us listen for the word of God as it comes to us today through the gospel of John

SERMON: "WHAT'S THE BIG IDEA?"

A boy comes home from school with the assignment to write an essay on his "family origins". So he asks his mother, "Mom, where do I come from?"

Not being ready at that moment to go into reproductive details she says, 'the stork brought you darling, and left you on the doorstep.'

Puzzled, he goes to his father and says, "Dad where did you come from?" His dad who is always ready to make a joke or spin a yarn, says "Oh, I was found at the bottom of the garden. The fairies brought me.'

The boy then goes to his grandmother with the same question and she gives the answer that SHE was always given for such questions, 'I was picked from a gooseberry bush', said grandma.

Desperate as to how he's going to write his essay with this information, the boy sits down and begins, "Based on extensive research, I have come to the conclusion that there has not been a natural birth in our family for three generations..."

The church did not have a natural birth- the church's beginnings were supernatural. Church was not a human idea. (though we've certainly picked up on it and formed a zillion variations of hierarchy, dogma and ways of worshiping). Church was GOD'S idea. And it was a BIG IDEA!

What WAS the "Big idea?" In today's scripture, Philip says to Jesus, "Lord, show us the Father". (It's ironic that he calls Jesus "Lord"- he DOES know who he's talking to- well, he knows.... and he doesn't know...). "Lord, show us the Father", he says.

And Jesus says, "Philip, you've been with me all this time and you still don't know- when you look at me, you see God the Father, but if you can't believe this, believe at least the WORKS you've seen- the miracles, those signs that only GOD can do."

This was the BIG IDEA- - that God was to be seen in and through a human being.

God wants to be known. As human beings how can we grasp, how can we comprehend God, who is non material, completely "other" than ourselves? It's like being faced with a page of script in Chinese- we need someone to translate!

And so God translated Godself, God translated the language of divine being into the language of human existence. Hidden in Jesus, in a human being, God speaks the language WE can understand- the language of flesh and blood, the language of pain, suffering, dying, a language that every human being can relate to.

This is God's "Big Idea": God comes in Jesus to be known, to be seen. And when it comes time for Jesus to die, to leave this realm, God's big idea gets even bigger.

"You will do GREATER works than I", says Jesus to his followers, "because I am sending you a helper, the Holy Spirit—who will be IN you and WITH you." Those who receive the Spirit, will become part of God's big idea- the idea that God may be seen in a human being.

Have WE seen God? If we've ever been loved unconditionally, we have seen God. If we've ever been forgiven, shown grace, we have seen God. The most powerful sign of God's presence is PEACE amongst people. Wherever divisions are broken down, where diverse people find unity, we see God.

I have been listening to an audio book "Strength in what Remains," by journalist Tracy Kidder. It's the account of a survivor of the massacre in Ruanda Burundi.

A Tutsi medical student was fleeing the violence. He'd been on the run, hiding from people for weeks until he fell exhausted in a banana patch. A Hutu woman, with a baby on her back, found him there. She said, "what are you doing?- you must go- you're very near the border"

He said he was too tired. He could not go on. But somehow with her help he did reach the border. There were masses of people there and Hutu militia were sorting them according to ethnic groupings- Tutsi or Hutu. The Tutsi would be killed.

And the Hutu woman put her arm around the young man, and claimed that he was her son. He told her not to do it, not to endanger herself. She replied that her only ethnicity was being a woman and a mother. And she steered him across the field till he could lose himself in the crowd that was pushing across the border.

What kind of courage gets into people that in the face of extreme danger they know so clearly who they are and who the other is?

Paul says that it is the love of God that has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit. Certainly when we see such love, love that overcomes fear, love that breaks down barriers between people, we know that we're seeing God in action.

When people are afraid, God's love is not seen. We know that fear of difference, fear of weakness can lead to bullying- as we saw on a school bus a week or two ago, when a 5 year old amputee was punched and bullied, and no one intervened. We know that people do nothing to stop bullying because they are afraid.

Afraid of inadequacy, afraid of appearing foolish, afraid of being rejected by others – Fear leads us to conform, to turn our backs on those who are different, and to permit violence - perhaps physical, perhaps mental emotional.

Many sectors of society even today are for example still not safe places for gays and lesbians.

Our FEAR cuts us off from compassion. There's currently a bill before the senate that would remove the option of pardon for ex offenders. Driven largely by the imminent release of Karla Hamolka. And there is little outcry against this bill.

Certainly we may not want Hamolka to be pardoned, but extending this as a rule across the board seems an excessive reaction. An MP said on TV that the government is not in the business of forgiveness. Perhaps. But are WE?

Are we, like Jesus to be about our father's business? The business of peace, of forgiveness, of acceptance, of second chances? When we are about God's business, when we strive for God's purposes, fear drains away, the peace that Jesus promises pours in.

When we are striving for God's purposes, we know that it doesn't all rest on us, we have a helper, the Holy Spirit, who will bring God's purposes to be. Fear drains away and peace pours in.

And we have a glimpse of God's purposes in Luke's Pentecostal story: People from different backgrounds and different ethnicities speak each other's language, and are UNDERSTOOD by one another.

A divine flame rests on each one, marks each person as a precious, Holy place, where God may dwell.

It's a picture of unity, understanding and valuing of every single individual

This is a picture of the Hebrew concept of shalom. Loosely translated as peace, shalom is a very BIG IDEA:

It's the idea of every person being restored to their rightful place in society, everyone has what is rightfully theirs- and this is more than property- it's familial relationships, it's our good name, it is our valid and respected place in community.

There's no greed- no one tries to get what is not theirs; everyone is secure and so there is no fear. It is a vision of a world without violence. A world where we honour the divine flame in each person, friend and stranger alike.

The story's told of St Francis of Assisi, when he was a young man still living in the home of his wealthy father. A beggar came to the door begging alms in the name of Jesus Christ. And Francis sent him away, because he didn't have time to deal with him.

Then he was struck with pangs of conscience; suddenly he had the sense that it was Jesus Christ himself who had come to his door, and he ran after the beggar, and gave to him everything he had.

Francis was so struck by the idea that Christ could be present in a beggar, that for a year he pondered the idea of whether Christ might be present also in him, Francis. And when he became convinced that this was so, and he passed by a leper one day, he embraced the leper and kissed him.

Now Francis was very fastidious, lepers were to him an anathema, but the Spirit of Christ in him enabled him to do what he could not otherwise have done.

All kinds of people are sent our way. Some we find difficult to respect; difficult to love, but the Holy Spirit within us helps us so that we can act in love –This was God's big idea in sending the Spirit – that God's love might shine through one human being to another..

This is the big idea of church: a community where our worship fans to life the divine spark in us, where our love for one another strengthens us to seek a just world, and to show in our daily lives God's grace and forgiveness.

I love the name of the church where the Obaras in Kenya worship. It's Called the Church of God's Last Hope. To my mind, that is so right! We often turn to God as OUR last hope; we often pray for the Holy Spirit to help us in OUR enterprises.

But that's not God's idea of the church or why the Holy Spirit is given. WE are GOD'S last hope. The Holy Spirit is poured out so that WE may be Christ's body here on earth. So that we may live in peace with one another. So that people may look on us and see God.

What do you think? can such a thing be possible? Is this story of the church's supernatural birth a tall tale, a yarn? Or is it true? Is it real? Will the Holy Spirit come to us and act through us, if WE pray?

Jesus says ask and you will receive, seek and you will find, knock and door will be opened to you. He says if we who are evil know how to give good gifts to OUR children- how much more will God to give to us the Holy Spirit when we ask.

Let us pray for the Holy Spirit now – let us make this hymn we sing a prayer of invitation for the Spirit to blow through us.....that God may be seen in our midst.

BENEDICTION

Go now into the world, in the power of the Holy Spirit,

May the Christ who walks on wounded feet
walk with you on the road

May the Christ who serves with wounded hands
stretch out your hands to serve

May the Christ who loves with a wounded heart
open up your hearts to love

May you see Christ in everyone you meet,
and may everyone you meet
see the face of Christ in you. Amen