

Epiphany IV Year C

“Hear the voice of the Bard!
 Who Present, Past & Future sees,
 whose ears have heard
 The Holy Word
 that walk'd among the ancient trees,”

Those words are from William Blake’s introduction to *Songs of Experience*... The Bard, the prophet...the seer...whose ears have heard...I want to talk today about seeing and hearing and experience...the experience of life when paid attention to, experience when engaged imaginatively and sacrificially...loved experience...I think that’s what Paul is getting at in his letter to the Corinthians; that Love must inter-penetrate all of our living; a life of giving always...It’s hard work to love the life experience... Our very life’s experience when engaged imaginatively and lovingly becomes the way to maturity, and it is maturity that engenders in us the transforming power of the Spirit...Now I’m speaking of maturity in the way the writers of scripture speak of it:...It is a lifelong process of growth in the Truth...a life long duty towards wisdom...the Buddhists call it enlightenment...but a duty, perhaps said another way... a duty to learn the art of goodness...experience then the means by which and in which we hear the enlightened Holy Word.... Scripture itself is the interpretation of experience.

One of the reasons I accepted the call to be your Rector, among many, was All Saints’ close association with the L’Arche community...most of you know about L’Arche, but for those of you who don’t: It is a worldwide organization with a local chapter in Mobile that serves the mentally disabled within intentional residential community. The people L’Arche serves live in residence with the staff of L’Arche...everyone takes meals together, shares in chores and in worship, creates art together and shares their life experience as community whose rule of life is respecting the dignity of these often considered the least of us....It is a world not ordered the way ours is where the strong are at the top and the weak at the bottom...It is a world modeled after mutual respect, and shared dignity and safe shelter and food enough and peace of mind...what else is there?

I can’t recall one single reason L’Arche held and holds this attraction for me...perhaps just their presence near us...their energy...the goodness nearby...over the years we have been privileged here to provide office and meeting space for them...we have taken meals with them...we have participated in worship with them...some core members have been and are

members here...we have helped to fund them...we have served on their board...we have buried their dead.

Just this past Tuesday I served on a panel for L'Arche consisting of me as a priest, and three team members (who are staff) and two core members who are residents who are disabled. The panel was to engage in conversation with a group of Birmingham Southern freshmen who had chosen to study intentional communities during their January short term. They had already visited a Benedictine community in North Alabama, and the Koinonia community in Americus Georgia.

I began with a description of our relationship with L'Arche...and how much it has enriched our community, etc. etc....but soon I found myself listening to the team and core members...One of the staff who lives in one of the residences described how she took the job because she simply needed work; but soon she began to see her caring for these people as a calling...and she began to know that they were caring for her as well...she began noticing that her relationships in her family improved...she no longer had time for petty arguments...She said she had found a way to love them again...and she had found a way to love herself...Once she almost quit after the deaths of two residents in one year whom she had grown to adore...but she said she had come to know that love is stronger than death.....Another team member said that in this intense and often messy work she had learned the art of forgiveness, both giving and receiving.....One student asked if this forgiving always worked...to which she replied...yes, always, or else we wouldn't last as a community.....She said she now knew that the human and the divine are one thing...and we need not look any further for it, this Truth made visible, than the community given us.

I sat in stunned silence at the words of these people...I thought to myself that their theology was so sophisticated without any training at all...and then I realized that they had been schooled in enlightened experience...their words rang of the Truth....unrehearsed....not canned...not the company line...just this holy knowing, Holy Word there among us in all gentleness and grace and humility and beauty...A word invincible, that makes invincible the community that bears it...the word sung from experience....moving over the face of creation... invincible Spirit Word, this.

Today's Gospel reading is about the Spirit Word. Luke's Gospel has three principal themes: the first theme envisions a coming new order....we heard Mary sing of it in the first chapter... "God has looked with blessing on the abased....God shows mercy...God has foiled the plots of the powerful overlords....and avenged the prideful...God has raised up the poor and

clothes them and feeds them...and honors them"...Mary's song will govern the narrative throughout this Gospel....and let's not forget that Mary's enlightened vision comes after the experience of crisis....the harrowing census itinerary...the scandal of her pregnancy...knowledge through experience...loved experience...that's good news.

And in our reading just last week, leading into today's reading we hear a reprise of the same song: Jesus reading from Isaiah, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor...liberty to the captives...to give sight to the blind...to proclaim God's jubilee"...the reordering of the world no less...and then Jesus stuns the assembly by saying that this new order...God's community of equals has begun as we speak.

The second theme is Spirit....that the story of the life and ministry of Jesus and the blossoming forth of the church in Luke and Acts is a chronicle as to the life of the Spirit...who the Spirit is and what the Spirit does, and how the Spirit does it....and then the third theme in which Luke is deeply interested is the tradition of the Prophets...and Jesus' likeness to them...the Prophets throughout Israel's history are the truth tellers...the Bards, the experienced ones of life grown wise in the sacred wisdom, the Holy Word, and the speaking and interpretation of it...for Luke, some hear the Holy word, many do not...Some act upon it and some do not...Truth hurts and heals...and there's no avoiding it....In our story today...the Jewish upper crust, the Synagogue establishment, can't abide that one such as Jesus...the child of the Joseph and Mary scandal...and Joseph a mere carpenter, can't abide that this one is the truth bearer.....no, not our picture of a prophet...and worse Jesus says that this kingdom is for all, even for foreigners and illegal immigrants....Jesus the anointed, Jesus the prophet in their midst speaks the truth of the matter, like the prophets come before....and like the prophets come before he is rejected.....and almost murdered.....and this rejection will, as we know, catch up with him.....Jesus here speaking from experience.....speaking the truth from artful paying attention...imaginative speculation...creative engagement with the way of things...you remember that Jesus has just come back from the desert having been tested by Satan for forty days...He has been shown the riches, the power and the privilege and the corruption of the establishment... Both Temple and government...buy in and you will be rewarded Satan avers...this an experiential crisis for Jesus...and in a cardinal act of Love Jesus chooses sacrifice....Jesus chooses the order of God's inclusive, collaborative and hospitable and peaceable and just commonweal....Jesus chooses life over death.

Jesus here for Luke the archetype of the people of Israel in the desert; for any Jewish listener worth his or her salt the 40 days would evoke the memory of the 40 year sojourn in the Sinai, the crux of their biblical history....a shared experience of survival...a shared experience of their God who cares for all...a shared faith....As the people of Israel sojourn in the desert they are forever reminded to care for the least...and that their sacrifice will make them a holy people....it is their sacrifice for the good of the whole that has forever saved them, they are reminded....the community of God, their shared experience the Word...the Word Spirit...the truth learned in love in and through enlightened experience....which I also want to name here as **imaginative repentance**....repentance: the word literally means to turn aroundso our life experience is a life long process of creative repentance...turning from that which does not bring life...and turning towards that which brings life and life abundant...this turning takes place in our conversations, in our work and in our play...in our study...in our passion for the good....Jesus' 40 days in the desert, a symbol of imaginative repentance....repentance, not just saying we're sorry...and sometimes we have to do that...but repentance an imaginative turning towards new possibilities, new ways of ordering our world, new hope, new life...repentance a dance with the Truth...the Spirit Truth, the Holy Word our ears have heard...Holy Word that never leaves things alone...but transforms, remaking our world into the way God intends to have it.

We, dear people of God, as the called faithful...we are the truth speakers...the words put in our mouths as with the prophets of old...Bards all....We must search out our own imaginative and constructive repentance so that we are able to welcome the prophet in our midst....imaginative and constructive repentance so that we are able to say yes to God's future begun in our hearing...we the ones to live in intentional community to be honed, enlightened for the Spirit's indwelling...in the line of the prophets no less...we are the ones full of the Spirit, bearing God's jubilee to the world...God's liberty set loose for all...love alive among us and in the flesh...God's liberty for all who are bound and crushed by the structures that would quench the light of the human community and the very light of God, Godself...the human and divine one light....a fragile light guttering against the brute winds of resistance...but brothers and sisters I heard it for myself this week, next door, from two young women grown wise in the Truth...grown wise in the Spirit Word...that love is stronger than death....a truth that is fragile in our world to be sure...but a truth that is invincible.