

Proper 8 Year C 2013

“No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God”

I saw a quote on Facebook just the other day....It was a quote from Mark Twain that said the two most important events in our lives are our births and then learning why we are here...I believe that....what a treat it would be to sit down with the great Samuel Clemmons and have a conversation with him about that statement...why we are here. That's what biblical literature and most other artistic expression are about...who are we as humans endowed with imagination, reason and ingenuity... and why are we here. As far as biblical literature goes, it is a narrative, mythic, symbolic, poetic, legendary, a compendium of Israel's theological history as to quite simply: Why are we here. We could begin with Genesis and travel the library that is the bible all the way to revelation and this theme would always surface....why are we here. But since we are in year C we'll just look at the lections for today.

In the fantastic reading from 2 Kings we see the passing of the torch as it were from the prophet Elijah...to his chosen successor Elisha....the image of the fiery chariot, particularly its wheels is a common image in Jewish mysticism....The wheel like the Mandala in eastern spirituality is a symbol of transformation...the universe itself turning inevitably to its recreation, its perfection. In this passage Elisha is given the mantle of Elijah to continue the saving work of his prophet predecessor. He knows why he is here: He is here for the same reason Elijah was here: to heal like Elijah; to call out injustice, particularly injustice in the seats of power; like Elijah; to serve the poor and the outcasts; to stand for truth; to stand for God's ways in earth....like Elijah and the prophets before and after. The prophetic tradition is a major theme for Luke.

In Luke the mantle is passed on to all who would follow Jesus, what we call the church, to do the same things Jesus and the prophets before him did: Jesus' death and resurrection and ascension are archetypes of the story of the Son of Man found in Daniel and other apocalyptic lore. The Son of man, the story goes, is to be rejected like the prophets, and return to heaven, only to return in great glory to usher in the new world order, of which Mary sings at the beginning of this gospel. Luke sees the Jesus event as one of cosmic proportions, just as the scribes of 2 Kings saw the prophetic tradition of Israel as having cosmic weight.

There are two important points I want to make about today's brief and somewhat cryptic gospel reading, keeping in mind Luke's overarching agenda, that is: the world's socio-economic and political paradigm is destined to change, that a gracious mutual and egalitarian world order is coming in which all live in dignity and well being; the kingdom of God so-called which as you know I call the commonweal of God for obvious, I hope obvious reasons; that salvation is at hand....salvation a term meant for the whole and not for the individual only. First of all, unlike many of the stories handed down in the Hebrew oral tradition, the Elijah, Elisha story one such story...Jesus makes it plain as day that there is no place for violence in this movement to bring in God's new order... Within the sentence in which Jesus rebukes his disciples for wanting to torch the town for the Samaritans lack of hospitality....which the Romans certainly would have done...Jesus makes it clear...and the Greek is most emphatic here...Our way will be one without violence....perhaps over the sweep of biblical narrative there is learning among the people Israel that violence won't do it...violence only begets more violence...violence will not set things right, and certainly is no means to effect God's ways in earth....you'd think we as the human family would have learned that by now....It is still something to learn for our own time... some blessed souls along the way knew this and they effected remarkable change for the better for our world...but still the old paradigm persists...as arms are manufactured and shipped at exponential rates around the world... seeds of more violence.

The second and equally important point in this passage is that our work as the mantle bearers of Christ is urgent...urgent...no time to waste. Normally when Jews travelled from Galilee to Jerusalem, they would avoid the despised region of Samaria, either by coming south through the Jezreel valley to the west, or heading south by following the Jordan to the east, but here Jesus sets his face, we are told and makes a straight path to his destiny and ours, and the world's....a straight path through Samaria to Jerusalem, a city which we are told kills her prophets. Again, as we see throughout this gospel, Luke is having Jesus and his followers breaking the boundaries of the tradition and the status quo....Luke is quite beside himself here....don't even take time to bury your father, or attend to your affairs; don't look back... make a straight path to what it is we have to do....all this hyperbole to emphasize the urgency of why we are here....This is why you are here: You are here with all urgency to break the boundaries of the old paradigm of injustice, a synonym for slavery, a death in life as Eliot would put it... that we would heal our sick and wounded, and work as would a plowman preparing the ground for seed, our eyes on the prize of ushering in God's

gracious and abundant commonweal of love, which is true and lasting freedom....That is our second birth in this world... Our second birth is the moment when we know why we are here...and we stand fit with courage to take on the mantle that our God has bestowed upon us.

As we approach the day of celebration of the independence of this great country and the freedom in which we live, let us pray that with all due urgency that we as a powerful nation act non-violently, non-violently, we've tried violence.... Let us act on behalf of the hurt of our world; let us prepare the ground for the fruits of peace and well being and justice, the fruits in short of love,...because in so doing the mantle offered to all humankind becomes one not of fear or indignity or oppression, but one of prophetic freedom and one of utter praise.