

Pentecost 2 – 22<sup>nd</sup> May 16

Readings: 1 Kings 18: 20-21, 30-39, Psalm 96, Galatians 12: 1-12, Luke 7: 1-10

As we begin this National Reconciliation Week, I want to tell you about the Kungarakan people of the Northern Territory; their country is around Litchfield National Park south of Darwin. They're not a large group and there's a reason for that. In the late 19<sup>th</sup> century quite a large group of them were camped at a rail siding named Stapleton about 80km south of Darwin on the fairly recently constructed North Australian Railway. They'd been forced off their traditional lands and were hungry. They were given damper to eat – but the damper had been made from flour laced with weed killer. Almost all of them died. One of the few survivors was a young woman named Alyandabu – and she is my daughter-in-law's great-great grandmother. I don't think Australia has really come to terms with or accepted what happened to many Aboriginal people – we do need times like National Reconciliation Week to focus our minds and prayers on the ministry of reconciliation, which, as St. Paul writes in 2 Corinthians, has been given to us.<sup>1</sup> Aboriginal people were and are different racially and culturally. Killing them was one way then of dealing with difference. And I think that all of our readings today address this question of dealing with difference in one way or another.

Elijah is perhaps the greatest of the Old Testament prophets – and for much of his ministry he has been battling opponents, especially the followers of Baal. Among the ancient Israelites, the cult of Ba'al was the greatest and most enduring threat to the worship of Yahweh alone. And Ba'al was not so much one competing god; it's a term that can refer to a number of gods, and even to human officials: gods who were patrons of cities, a god of the rain, and even Ba'al Zebub, also known as Beelzebub who will be identified as the "prince of demons" in the New Testament. Elijah is calling the people back to the worship of the one true God, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. And it is not a popular move. The people seem to *like* worshiping both Yahweh and Ba'al; you might call it covering all bets, or playing it safe. So in the verses not read this morning, the priests of Baal build an altar and offer an animal and call on their name of their God to send down fire. Then, and this is where we pick up the story, Elijah calls on God, who sends down a lightning bolt to consume the offering presented, along with everything else. The priests of Baal have already tried the same thing and have failed miserably – the writer of 1 Kings says they have raved on until midday.<sup>2</sup> The Israelites see this and they turn to God, falling on their faces and proclaiming, "The LORD indeed is God; the LORD indeed is God." All very well you might think – great victory for Elijah and the God of Israel, and so it is. But what then do we make of verse 40, which the lectionary compilers conveniently leave out. "Elijah said to them (that is the people of Israel) seize the prophets of Baal and do not let one of them escape. Then they seized them, and Elijah brought them down to the Wadi Kishon and killed them there." How easy it is for religious violence to erupt. Maybe,

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<sup>1</sup> 2 Corinthians 5: 18-19

<sup>2</sup> 1 Kings 18:29

you might say, it was easier in Elijah's time – easier to see who was right and who was wrong. On one side, God's side, people are pure and unsullied, on the other side, on Baal's side, followers, particularly the leadership are evil and worthy of destruction. Maybe, you might say it isn't like that anymore. Isn't it? In the last couple of decades there has been dreadful religious violence in Nigeria and Indonesia between Christians and Muslims and in the Balkans between Catholic and Orthodox Christians with perpetrators on all sides. There is always the temptation to demonise or destroy one's opponents. Were the followers of Baal evil? Certainly there were things they did that we would describe as wrong or evil or sinful, but who are we to cast the first stone. I suspect they really believed in the power of the earth and fertility gods they worshipped. They practiced fertility rites to insure a good harvest and national well-being. As wrong or misguided as we might judge these rituals to be, if there were no good harvests, poverty and starvation would be the lot of their people. How might the story be told from their perspective? How might they have felt when the gods they trusted remained silent? If given the chance, might some of them have accepted the God of Israel? We will never know; they were never given the opportunity for transformation because they were killed.

Paul writes to the Galatians. Once he has dispensed with the opening salutation, he's quickly into rebuke. "I am astonished," he writes, "that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different Gospel."<sup>3</sup> Who were Paul's opponents – those who he accuses of confusing the Galatians. Here, as elsewhere, he was probably in conflict with the Gnostics. Gnosticism was a widespread belief system then. Gnostics believed that there were a number of divine spheres or heavens and one was able to graduate from one to the other of one had the right level of knowledge. Thus Gnosticism promoted a sense that salvation or being put right with God came righteous works. Paul repeatedly preached against this deception, affirming that salvation is by grace, a divine gift. Our good works form a necessary part of Christian life, and they are pleasing to God – but they come as a *response* to the gifts of grace, not a means to earn them. But were the Gnostics wicked people? Well, I don't think so. It's a bit like the Pharisees with whom Jesus was in conflict. They weren't wicked either – sure they misunderstood him, sometimes deliberately I'm sure and they were misguided. So, do those with whom Paul was in conflict deserve to be accursed? And in case they haven't noted what he's said, he repeats the curse. That's another way of dealing with difference. Later in Galatians, Paul affirms the inclusiveness of the Gospel "There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus"<sup>4</sup> He's so adamant about this sense of inclusion, yet here he is in this morning's passage running roughshod over those who disagree with him. Again the question arises: can we hold differing theological views or relate to different faiths without the temptation to figuratively demolish them and to curse them?

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<sup>3</sup> Galatians 1:6

<sup>4</sup> Galatians 3:28

Well, and I guess you can see where I'm going, there is another way of dealing with difference, and for that we turn to this morning's gospel. Jesus takes an altogether more irenic view to diversity. In fact, contrary to many of our preconceptions of Jesus' fellow Jews, in this passage, the Jewish community is crying out on behalf of this Roman centurion. He works for Rome, the occupying power, he's certainly aware of the authority he wields and no doubt enforces Roman law diligently. As a member of the Roman army, he would have worshiped Jupiter, Apollo and Diana – among many others. Do you notice, by the way, that there's no indication at all in the Gospel that he "converts". He's unlike others who are oppressive. The Jewish community recognises that he cares for them and the local leaders want to reciprocate in some way so they commend him to Jesus who accepts their open-spiritedness and the Centurion's humility and cures the servant from a distance. Christ's ministry exercised with grace breaks down the barriers of difference; of insider and outsider, oppressor and oppressed, and Jew and Gentile.

May we, as the body of Christ, and as recipients of God's grace exercise that ministry in this community, breaking down barriers instead of re-inforcing them by hard heartedness. And we've begun to model that. Let me remind you of the first paragraph of the agreement between St. Paul's Ipswich and the South Sudanese Anglican Community which begins "Members of the Sudanese Anglican community are welcome to join the parish of St Paul's, Ipswich, as equal members of the body of Christ and equal participants in the life of the parish. Together we are members of the worldwide Anglican Communion, coming from different cultures but sharing a common spiritual heritage. We recognise that God is calling us to a common mission of worship, prayer, study, fellowship, witness and service in this place." And it concludes "We.....will endeavour, under God, to be channels of Christ's love and grace to the people of our congregations and throughout the wider community." May it continue to be so.