

The Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany
January 29, 2017, Year A
St. Dunstan's Anglican Church, Largo, FL

1 Kings 17:8-16

Psalm 36:5-10

1 Corinthians 1:18-31

John 2:1-11

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

From our New Testament reading this morning, Paul wrote: "For the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God."

The lectionary offered up this verse last Sunday and now again today. It describes the difference between the people of God and those who are not really of God. Those who are not really of God may identify with Christians in their values. They may even go to church and know the answers to important questions of faith.

But do they really know and trust God completely, or is the word of the cross folly to them when we get right down to the details? It's easy to see the difference between a pagan and a Christian if the pagan lives in an African jungle and the Christian is a typical middle-class North American. But it is harder to distinguish those who are saved from those who are perishing when we all look alike, attend the same church, and know each other as friends.

How do we tell the difference?

Let's look at the Scriptures we have read this morning. In our Old Testament reading from 1st Kings, we heard the account of God's provision for a widow and her son. God had told Elijah to go to Zarephath, a town in Sidon which is now southern Lebanon, and that he had "commanded a widow there to feed" him. When he arrived, Elijah saw a widow gathering firewood, and asked her to bring him some water and then some food. But she responded, "As the LORD your God lives, I have nothing baked, only a handful of flour in a jar and a little oil in a jug. And now I am gathering a couple of sticks that I may go in and prepare it for myself and my son, that we may eat it and die."

"Elijah said to her, "Do not fear; go and do as you have said. But first make me a little cake of it and bring it to me, and afterward make something for yourself and your son. For thus says the LORD, the God of Israel, 'The jar of flour shall not be spent, and the jug of oil shall not be empty, until the day that the LORD sends rain upon the earth.'"

The widow thought she was preparing her last meal. She had no resources left. But a simple act of faith produced a miracle. She trusted Elijah who spoke a prophecy from God to her, and she gave him all she had to eat.

Faith is the step between promises and assurance. We can read about the promises of God and see how wonderful they truly are, but without faith that God can and will do what he has promised, they are only words on a page. Miracles seem so out of reach for our feeble faith. But

every miracle, large or small, begins with an act of obedience. We may not see the solution until we take the first step of faith.

So if we use Paul's method to discern between someone who is being saved and another who is perishing, we can look at the spiritual fruit a person is bearing. Did the story about Elijah and the widow at Zarephath really happen, or is it just a story to illustrate something? Was there a miracle involved, or is there some other explanation because miracles are just biblical ways of making a point? And the deeper and more important question is this: Is everything in the Bible true, or is some of it just allegory or some other literary device to teach a lesson or make a point?

If we are not certain that every word in the Bible is from God and therefore true, then it is possible that other parts or even all of it is not really true – like salvation, assurance of eternal life, etc. How do we know there is a heaven? Being uncertain about any of these things reduces the word of the cross to folly.

Jehovah Jireh is one of the names of God used in the Old Testament. It means "God will provide." And it happened as Elijah had prophesied. "The jar of flour was not spent, neither did the jug of oil become empty, according to the word of the LORD that he spoke by Elijah." God gives those who believe these signs and wonders to help us strengthen our faith, but to those who are perishing, this story is folly.

So did Jesus feed five thousand with just a boy's lunch so that they were filled? Or is that just a story to tell us that Jesus had the power of God at his disposal? A church member at a church I served some years ago told me that people now think Jesus was able to unlock the charity in the people's hearts and they all contributed food and shared, because everyone knows feeding 5,000 people with a boy's lunch is not possible. Some people have no room in their understanding for miracles, so there must be another explanation.

Perhaps the issue hinges on the fact that the Bible was written a long time ago before people knew any better. Some feel that these kinds of things, like miracles, signs and wonders, no longer happen, if they ever happened at all. Some churches teach that signs and wonders stopped at the end of the apostolic age, which would be around AD100. But these things are still happening.

The Book of Acts ended because that is all its author, Dr. Luke, observed or heard about. But the Church is still here, and growing every day. In the chapter of Acts that is recording spiritual and physical events of the early 21st century, a Taliban soldier in northern Pakistan saw a vision from God where he was to take instruction from people God would send to him in the morning as to what God wanted him to do to serve him. He gave his life to Christ and went to preach Christ in the mosques in the desert region of Pakistan where he was born.

People asked about this strange message about Isa (Jesus' name in Arabic) and what it means to them. One person challenged him. He asked, "If your God is so powerful, then ask him to make it rain. (They had not had any rain for a long time.)" So Hank prayed, and later that day it rained.

Is that folly, or is that the power of God? I know this man's brother, and I heard this from him first hand. I also know the Anglican priest who led him to Christ. This is real. All the members of that mosque are now followers of The Way, even the Imam.

Let's look at what Paul wrote in his first letter to the Corinthian Church. "For the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. For it is written, 'I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart.'" He is quoting the prophet Isaiah (Isaiah 29:14).

Paul goes on to say the obvious, that "God [has] made foolish the wisdom of the world." God is so powerful and so wise that there is no way to compare him to the power and wisdom of the world. To those of us who are saved, the word of the cross is the power of God. We understand that Jesus' death on the cross is our salvation. We have the wisdom and power of God at our disposal. Those who mock or do not seriously consider the word of the cross are perishing. The wisdom and power they claim to have that tells them the cross of Christ is foolish are basing their understanding on the world's wisdom and power which is nothing at all in the sight of the Lord.

Finally, our gospel reading from John about Jesus changing water into wine at a wedding is another test of who we are, those being saved or those who think such a story is foolish or not true in the actual facts of the matter. Perhaps he just sent out one of the disciples to buy more wine so the host would not be embarrassed. This came from the same person that explained the feeding of the 5,000. She was a faithful Episcopalian who is now an Anglican. This kind of thinking is closer to home than some of us would care to admit.

Our culture, which the Bible refers to as "the world," has pushed so many of us into being a people who are skeptical, trust no one, and believe science and technology can now or will soon be able to explain everything. For those who subscribe to those perspectives, it is a stretch to believe that God actually is who he says he is. The Devil has done a good job in distracting us away from the truth.

We need to be and do better than that. We need to be so sure of what we believe that we could shout it from the rooftops. That Taliban soldier did at the risk of his life. Think and pray on our key verse today and in the days to come. "For the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God." Don't be caught up in the folly. Recognize that what you know comes with batteries included, and the power of God never needs to be recharged.

So "let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father, who is in heaven" (Matthew 5:16).

And now unto you, O Lord, be ascribed all might, majesty, power and dominion. In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.