

## Trinity 1

1 Kings 17.8-16(17-24), Galatians 1.11-24, Luke 7.11-17

On the second morning of my holiday in Egypt – after doing pyramids and the sphinx – we were taken to the Egyptian museum. I don't like museums much, the interminable drag around galleries of glass cases following bored schoolchildren and guides who have said it all too many times. But on this occasion we stepped smartly through the crowds, past hundreds of worthy exhibits to stop in front of one of the most ancient pieces of the entire collection, the seated scribe. I realised it was familiar to me but was not expecting to meet the original head on. It is a sculpted figure, about two foot high, cross legged, with a writing tablet on his knees and a pointed object in his hand. But the most extraordinary thing about him was his eyes. They were focused, attentive, waiting. Whether he was listening for dictation or waiting for inspiration I couldn't say, but this five thousand year old figure moved me in a way I find difficult to describe. He was waiting to inscribe a word, to enact a command, to make something real.

While I have been away you have celebrated Pentecost and Trinity and today the church reverts to ordinary time, green Sundays. We have celebrated God's great deeds in salvation: the coming of Christ, his death and resurrection, the ascension, the coming of the Spirit. And now is the season of our response. We, like the scribe, are here to make real the deeds of God.

Our readings for today speak to that call. All three in different ways are about prophecy. A prophet is not a fortune teller or a doomsayer. The word prophet simply means one who speaks on behalf of someone else. In the Biblical context the prophet enacts God's word, and makes it real. Unlike the fortune teller or the doomsayer, the prophet in the Bible is not there to fulfill expectations or to tell people what they want to hear. The prophet's word is divine. It is alive and brings life. We can see this in the Gospel story, the raising of the son of the widow of Nain. This is an unusual story – it only occurs in Luke's Gospel. And it is odd for other reasons too. No one knows exactly where Nain is, nothing else in the New Testament happens there. And then we never find out why Jesus is there in the first place. No one has sent him a message, no one has asked for his help. He just happens to be approaching the gate of the town when a funeral procession was coming out. A young man has died. There is a crowd. The young man's mother weeps. She does not recognise Jesus, she does not propel herself forward begging his pity.

But Jesus says to her, 'Do not weep' and touches the funeral bier and speaks to the young man, who spookily, terrifyingly sits up, no longer dead. The immediate response is fear, well it would be. Fear and then wonder and amazement. The verdict is that 'A great prophet has risen among us!' A prophet, because they see in Jesus' word to the mother and the son, a word from the living God, the God who raises the dead.

There is a deliberate connection here with our Old Testament reading. God's prophet, Elijah, under threat of persecution by King Ahab and Queen Jezebel is sent to live in a Zaraphath in Sidon. This is not a place of safety and refuge as you might think, it is the home of Jezebel herself. God tells him that he has commanded a widow there to feed him. When he arrives and sees a woman gathering wood he asks for a drink. But she has nothing to feed him with. There is famine and all supplies have run out. The woman and her son are facing their last meal and then death. Elijah, incredibly, instructs her to first feed him, and

then and only then to look after her own needs when there's nothing left. No 'women and children first' for Elijah! But the widow, obedient or perhaps just beyond care, does what he commands. And his word turns out to be a living word, a prophet's word. A word that can multiply flour and oil out of nothing.

In both stories there is a restoration that defies the usual laws of cause and effect. Death happens, starvation happens. Supernatural reversals of death, endless supplies of flour and oil do not happen in our normal world. Speaking of the widow of Zarephath Jesus himself points out that there were many widows in Israel during the famine at the time of Elijah, and yet the prophet was only sent to this one. Not because she was special, any more than the woman of Nain was special. There's something important about the random, accidental nature of these collisions between human need and the life-giving word of God.

I find that strangely comforting. It suggests to me that faith is not about expecting God to look after me and mine, rather that within the storm of random events that make up our lives there are connections that we do not see, meanings that we cannot easily read in which God remains sovereign Lord, majestic love, infinite compassion. The prophet speaks God's word and there is plenty out of poverty; life out of death. Tragic, random disaster cannot kill God or destroy hope in God.

Of course, most of the time we walk blindfold as far as being sure of God's will. And yet as for Elijah and Jesus so for us; it is in the random, accidental circumstances of our lives that we respond as we really are, with all desires known and no secrets hid. That is not to suggest our job as Christians is to be stoical in the face of disaster or to offer the saccharine of a bland untroubled faith. What we are called to do is to listen and enact God's living word in the storm and complexity of everyday life. This comes down to the personal, to you and me, to our wrestling with scripture and our habits of prayer.

Paul's testimony in Galatians is an example of that great apostle trying to explain his call from God in the face of criticism and questioning. He does that by telling his story, the story of his former life in Judaism, his zeal, for the tradition of his ancestors, the revelation of Jesus which led him to preach the Gospel to the Gentiles. We often speak of the conversion of Paul, but he never claims here that he has converted from Judaism to Christianity. What he describes is his call to follow Elijah and Jesus as a prophet, and he seems to deliberately echo the call of other prophets as he explains his own. Like the prophet Jeremiah he has been set apart before he was born. Like Elijah he withdraws to the desert, to Arabia. But at the heart of Paul's call is his encounter with the living Christ, 'God was pleased to reveal his son to me' and with that revelation came the particular mission, 'to proclaim him among the Gentiles'.

Paul was never stoical or bland. His holiness was, we might say, full of holes. Vulnerability, touchiness, pride – he is not an altogether attractive figure. Yet through him God shines through. He is in spite of himself a prophet, amid the turbulence of his times, he is able to speak and enact the living word of God. That is the vocation of the church. When I had my encounter with the scribe in the Cairo museum I realised that this is also the vocation of humanity, to be ready, gathered attentive in the storm of human trouble to enact the word that brings life.

