

August 8, 2021 - 11th Sunday after Pentecost - Reflection

2 Samuel 18:5-9;31-34, Psalm 130, Ephesians 4:25 - 5:2, John 6: 35, 41-51

Over the past few weeks I have been speaking of our journey with Jesus as a life with a purpose and a destination. In his book, “After You Believe” Bishop N.T. Wright suggests that one of the goals of this journey is to produce in us, and all followers of Jesus, “A mature and genuine human life”. Wright argues that this process is aided by an adoption of the practice of Christian virtues and he uses as one illustration the story of Captain Sully who saved a plane load of people because of his training and some very exceptional piloting. You may recall that Captain Sully landed his plane after the engine was damaged shortly after takeoff. What could have been a huge disaster was averted, in large part, because Captain Sully practiced what might be called ‘piloting virtues’ to the point where he didn’t have to think, he just reacted in a very appropriate way. As we all move along this journey with Jesus and develop toward that mature and genuine human life we are drawn together into a fellowship and brought into contact with the story of God’s people throughout history. We are invited to develop the practices of Christian virtue in order to participate in the process of maturing as God’s people. Much of that practice takes place in the context of our worship and other congregational gatherings.

Each week, during our liturgies, we are offered up to 4 different scripture readings and for the past number of weeks one of those readings has featured the life of King David. From the time of his anointing as king of Israel in place of Saul to David’s Coronation as King of all Israel we have been shown an imperfect man of God who was honoured to be called ‘a man after God’s own heart’. Very few other Old Testament characters have shaped the life of the nation of Israel more than David. It is interesting to me that not only his history is included in the Bible but also the words of many of the songs/psalms he wrote. We see through these items a real person who had successes and failures, who made good decisions and bad ones. At the same time we are shown a man who loved God and who tried to live a life of gratitude toward God even when his personal failings got in the way. There were signs of what we might call Christian virtues in his life as well as some pretty large errors. In today’s reading we hear about the end of a rebellion which was led by David’s eldest son, Absalom. Absalom had felt that he would make a much better ruler than his father and so he gathered some faithful helpers and took over the throne by force. The rebellion ended with the death of Absalom and, even though he had rebelled, David felt great sorrow when he learned of this son’s death. The sorrow that David experienced on the news of the death of his son reminds us that he too went through trials. Stories describing a relationship between God and a man such as David’s are sometimes troubling to read or hear but they can be useful to remind us that in the process of following God troubles in life may come. These troubles are not signs

that God has abandoned us any more than David's troubles meant God had abandoned him. God does not forget his promises and, even though it can sometimes take longer than we want, always delivers on those promises. The story of David is an important portion of the story of God's restoration of humanity's original ideal which sees its climax in the person of "great David's greater son" who lived a mature and genuine human life.

It was (and is) Jesus' role to bring to completion and perfection God's plan of salvation. The nation of Israel and its Messiah Jesus, were to be the means through which God restored the plan to have a kingdom of priests which would bring a blessing to all nations. Jesus became the means through which the 'bread of heaven - the bread of life' would be shared. He declared that he was even more than the giver of bread - he was the very bread of life. This concept confused people and caused them to misunderstand what God was doing. This concept continues to confuse people and yet that confusion does not prevent the concept from being true. In the days of Moses God delivered bread, manna, to sustain the physical bodies of the nation of Israel. The people were required to go out and collect it each day under some fairly strict instructions and we learn that this gift of daily bread pointed to an even greater form of bread. The bread of life feeds our spirits and our souls and contains the promise of care in the age to come. This bread of life comes into us through our connection with Jesus. This fact became more clear as the day of Jesus' crucifixion came near. It wasn't until his last Passover meal with his disciples that Jesus cleared up some of the confusion that existed about his declaration that he was the bread of heaven. During that meal, we are told, Jesus took one of the loaves of unleavened bread and said, "This is my body which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me" and then he took a cup of wine and said, "This is my blood which is shed for you. Drink this in remembrance of me". The symbols of bread and wine were to become the physical means through which we could 'eat his body and drink his blood' and this action become one of the central practices of the Christian Church. In this way the bread of life is communicated to the people of God as long as they receive it in faith. Through these means God provides us with 'food for the journey' and a sign that he has remembered his promises and another way for us to grow in maturity toward genuine humanity.

The journey with Jesus takes place in our real lives. The ups and downs, the successes, failures, and everything in between. The story of David shows us that God's love is steadfast and sure even when our behaviour is unhealthy. The story of Jesus shows the wonder of life in the kingdom of heaven and the cost of obedience. The apostle Paul gives encouragement to us through his encouragement to the people of Ephesus as we are urged to 'live a life worthy of the calling we have received' and to only speak that which builds up. This is because we continue this journey in the company of God alongside

our faith community who adds support and encouragement to our journey. During the months of this pandemic when we were unable to get together I have become even more aware of the importance of the faith community. It is within the context of our faith community that most of our practice of the Christian virtues takes place and our maturity is tested. When the pandemic was announced and we were all sent to our homes I was proud to see the many ways Christian virtues continued to be demonstrated through the members of the Anglican Church of Canada and, in particular, this faith community. While some mistakes were made and we failed to live up to the calling of God in other ways there were plenty of examples where the emergency brought out the very best in us. My prayer is that as we come back together with the lowering of restrictions we will continue to grow in maturity and genuine humanity and allow God's Holy Spirit to draw us even closer to each other. I also pray that the sign of bread shared in our celebrations of Holy Communion will become the bread of life for those who partake and for those who are unable to gather physically with us. May God grant the blessing of His presence among us and within us. Amen.