

A Sermon for the Sixteenth Sunday after Trinity, September 7, 2008

The Rev. Stephen C. Scarlett

Our epistle (Ephesians 3:13f.) says that God “is able to do exceeding abundantly above all that we ask or think according to the power that works in us.” This suggests that our expectations are rather low when it comes to prayer. God is able to do much more than what we ask for.

What do we typically ask for? We ask for forgiveness. We ask for wisdom and guidance. We ask for healing. We ask to be saved from danger. We ask for good things for those we love and, if we’ve read the Sermon on the Mount recently, also for our enemies. In our better moments, we ask for the conversion of hearts to faith. We ask for good to triumph over evil. We ask for Christ to come.

How is God able to do exceeding abundantly more than all of this? Perhaps we don’t see clearly enough what God has planned for us. Perhaps our prayers are too focused on managing life in this world and not enough on how life in this world is connected to the coming kingdom of God.

Consider the gospel today (Luke 7:11f.). Jesus came upon a funeral procession that was on the way to the tombs to bury a young boy. What do you think the mother, or others in the crowd, expected Jesus to do? Perhaps he would speak a word of comfort to the grieving mother. Perhaps Jesus would make some provision for her support now that she was all alone. No one expected Jesus to raise the young boy to life, but God is able to do exceeding abundantly above all that we ask or think.

This raising of the widow’s son is a picture of our own resurrection. Jesus, as Lord, gave a command to the dead boy. “Young man I say to thee, arise!” The New Testament tells us that a similar command will be given to us on the last day. In John 5:28-29, Jesus said, “The hour is coming, in which all who are in the graves will hear [the voice of the Son of God] and come forth.”

In 1 Thessalonians 4:16, we are told that when Jesus returns, he will give “a cry of command” and “the dead in Christ will rise.” And the words of the burial office proclaim, “I am the resurrection and the life, saith the Lord: he that believeth in me, though he were dead, yet shall he live” (BCP 324).

The hope of resurrection is the foundation for every prayer. The comfort, healing and guidance we ask for and receive anticipate the resurrection. They are a taste, right now, of the health and wisdom that we will receive in full measure then. Without the ultimate horizon of resurrection, all we would ever be asking for are things we will eventually lose by death.

The resurrection hope is also the foundation for our patient endurance in time of tribulation, when our prayers do not seem to be answered. For those who put their faith in Jesus Christ, every pain of life is a taste of Good Friday that gives us the promise of Easter.

All that God is doing in our lives and in the world looks forward to the promised day when our bodies and the creation will be renewed (Romans 8:19-23). The God who made this world in the beginning and proclaimed, “It is good” (Genesis 1:31), has promised a day of new creation. The world and our bodies will be changed. Order and beauty will again be brought out of chaos by the power God has to subdue all things to himself (Philippians 3:20-21).

But sometimes we can't see beyond the pain of the day or the challenge of the season. This is why God is able to do exceeding abundantly above all that we ask or think. Our goal is to limp through the week. God's goal is to raise us from the dead.

The key to understanding God's power to do more than we ask or think is to perceive how God uses everything in our lives to make us like Christ and prepare us for the resurrection. That which seems like a failure or a defeat from the vantage point of the world looks different from the perspective of resurrection. Once we see clearly the glorious conclusion to the story, we can see how God uses for good the setback that takes place in the middle chapters. As 2 Corinthians says, "Our light affliction, which is but for a moment, is working for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory." (4:17).

St. Paul was in jail when he wrote our epistle. He was suffering. But he did not descend into self-pity because he understood how his suffering was a part of God's larger and glorious plan. In our epistle today, he was saying, in essence, "Don't worry about my suffering. Rather, understand the big picture of what God is doing."

And he seems to be saying to us, "Don't focus on the trials of life. Rather, focus on the power of God at work in you." For if we are inwardly strengthened by the Holy Spirit, if Christ lives in our hearts by faith, if we can see the breadth and length and depth and height of God's love, everything else will pale by comparison.

We each come to the altar of God with our unique trials and tribulations. But we do not come to think about those things. We come to lift up our eyes to see God and understand his power. We come to connect our small stories to his big story. As we receive Christ and are made one with him, our human stories of sorrow and death are transformed into parts of his story of resurrection and life.

We may ask merely for comfort, guidance, healing and various provisions for life, but God is about the business of raising us from the dead; for God "is able to do exceeding abundantly above all that we ask or think, according to the power that works in us."