

SERMON FOR TRINITY 10 | 13.08.23

I Kings 9: 9-18; Romans 10: 5-15; St Matthew 14: 22-33

Last weekend Maria and I took her mother Alice to the west of Ireland to meet up with her older brother James and his family. James is 91 and lives in retirement in St John's, Newfoundland, a former Mountie. This was almost certainly his last trip back to the village of Accony where they all grew up.

It was a memorable trip for lots of reasons as we accompanied James to key places that he remembered: the school house, the seashore where he collected the Wrack, the serrated seaweed that grows just above the low water mark on rocky shores which was spread in those days as a kind of natural fertiliser on the poor soil of Co Mayo, alongside the edible dilisk that served as a snack for hungry children. At every gate there was another story: people remembered, events recalled, old customs explained – births, deaths, celebrations ... and of course the tragedies of all sorts which all came tumbling out of his remarkable memory. We were encouraged to buy a new book by a distant relative, Michael Lyons, and I have enjoyed the skill with which Michael recreates the atmosphere of those hard pressed post Famine communities so that you can almost taste the salty sea air and feel the effort that was needed just to stay alive, the dependence on the natural world from which they eked out a living, of sorts – the streams where the salmon ran, the stony paths where dogs hunted down unguarded sheep, the yard where the family ate while the chimneys were swept with twigs.

As Michael says, the young find it almost impossible to imagine such things today. He writes: *I hear the youngsters say 'Surely no salmon ever ran there'. And yet they did, every year and in their scores. And now they are gone. But we do not wish you to feel guilty because you are advantaged. But we know that, blessed are you are with all the advances of technology and the excitement of modern entertainment - not to mention running water and toilets – we also know that you cannot on your own save the earth and the oceans, the great lakes and the rivers, any more than we could...*

The stories that make up our readings at today's Mass are not so very different from the stories told by James Prendergast and Michael Lyons. They too are from another world, a world almost closed to us. Poor Elijah is at his wits end, running from Queen Jezebel and her horde of pagan priests.

Jesus and the disciples have just heard that Jesus' cousin John the Baptist had just had his head chopped off in prison because the King was drunk and he wanted to show off in front of a girl who took his fancy at a big party. These are not our worlds - so why do we spend time listening to these old tales?

Making breakfast one day this week, I happened to be listening, at least with half an ear, to a Buddhist speaking on 'Thought for the Day'. And the bit that got to me as I spread marmalade on my toast was this: *every good action – whether it is noticed or not – lasts for ever. It makes a difference and builds peace and harmony in the world.*

And instinctively I knew that the speaker was right. I am not a Buddhist and I know almost nothing about what Buddhism teaches, but that truth shone out like an old friend in the darkness.

Why, because it chimes in with almost everything that I have ever believed about human relationships – and my relationship with God too. We don't care for one another because of what we will get back; we love people 'warts and all', just because they are who they are. And our efforts to do good and to reach out to those in need are the precious building blocks that silently, invisibly, are transforming the world and filling it with love and joy. That is our common experience.

And as our readings want to tell us, it is when we do what is right that we are also reaching out to God, trying to mirror what he would do in those circumstances. For Elijah, literally at the end of his tether, God teaches him to stand and listen. But the reassurance that he is desperately looking for doesn't come in anything spectacular – not in the mighty wind, not in an earthquake or even in a fire – but in the thing that he least expects: in silence. God was there for him – but only when he had stopped running. God was there in the stillness, giving him a new confidence but only when Elijah had given up trying to do everything himself.

Peter and the disciples hadn't had it easy either. Having watched Jesus feed the 5000 and the twelve baskets of scraps had been collected, they all needed time out too. So Jesus tells them to take the boat to the other side of the lake while he went off for a bit of time to himself. But the lake is shallow in those parts and even a small gust of wind could create a squall angry enough to make them all sea-sick.

As the ship tossed and turned and Peter got more and more scared, he sees what at first sight seems to be a ghost – and then turns out to be Jesus.

Except that Jesus is walking on water.

O no, not another apocryphal story, not another long Irish tale!

But actually St Matthew is not particularly bothered about whether Jesus was able to walk on water, or had found some stones in the shallow waters to enable him to meet the disciple's boat. What interests Matthew is that at the time when Peter is crying out for help because he thought they were all going to drown, Jesus is already half way there, coming to meet him 'where he is'. The story is not about the 'how' but about the 'why': Peter needed Jesus - and Jesus was right there when he needed him. As the verse from Psalm 34 says, *when the poor man cried, the Lord answered him, and took away all his fear.*

James' stories were often a bit confusing – we didn't know all the characters involved for a start – but as he described the lives of this tough, spartan and often unlucky family group living on the edge of Europe, it was their natural and quite unsentimental instinct to put their total trust in God that would see them through.

Tomorrow is August 14th and in the Church's calendar it is the day when we remember a 20th century saint and martyr, Fr Maximilian Kolbe. Caught up in the invasion of Poland by the Nazis, in 1941, Kolbe found himself in a concentration camp where he did his utmost to care for his fellow Poles in absolutely horrendous conditions.

During that time a prisoner escaped and, at an early morning parade, in the freezing cold, ten men were selected to die in a starvation cell as a warning to the others. When one of those chosen at random cried out, *My wife, my children*, Fr Kolbe stepped forward and offered to take his place and in the punishment cell he continued to stand alongside each of other nine until the last of them had died. He was finally killed by lethal injection. He had been there for the others when they needed him.

It doesn't matter whether we are in rural Ireland, ancient Israel, war torn Poland, the lands of the Buddhist east or here in Islington, the truth remains the same: whatever good we do is never wasted or forgotten because it is another example of the way that God reaches out to us: how he comforts and restores us – just as he did Elijah, the Apostle Peter – and our Uncle James.