

Youth Sunday

A sermon preached by Rudyard G. Bell at Christ Church Cathedral on Youth Sunday, June 10, 2007.

Good morning, and welcome to Christ Church Cathedral Youth Sunday.

When Dean Diamond contacted me a few weeks ago and asked if I would preach the sermon today, my initial reaction was one of flattery. It was quite a boost to my ego to think that someone as loquacious and well-spoken as the Very Reverend James A. Diamond felt I was capable of representing the cathedral youth in such a central and public manner.

As time progressed, however, the sensation of having been honored began to fade, and in its place emerged a new sensation, one of having been selected for some extreme form of punishment. I began to feel like the proverbial condemned man, and I thought back over my actions of the past few years, examining them carefully for some evidence of wrongdoing for which the Dean was now holding me accountable. He must really have it in for me! What had I ever done to him, or to the cathedral at large, to be singled out for such excruciating and prolonged punishment? How terribly, terribly unfair!

All kidding aside, it is a genuine honor to be selected to deliver today's sermon. The clergy who, Sunday after Sunday, present messages of the spirit, make it look easy, but I can tell you it is because they are good at it that it appears to happen without effort, and I wish to thank them for this opportunity.

Both the Old and New Testament readings today tell the story of widows' sons who were raised from the dead. In the Old Testament passage, Elijah is taken in by a widow so poor and so hungry that she and her son are expecting to starve to death. Even so, she welcomes Elijah as a guest, and is prepared to give away her last meager scraps of food. God is so impressed with her generosity that he performs a miracle, and continually refills her bin of flour and jar of oil. Not only does this happen during Elijah's visit, but God promises that it will continue until He once again sends rain upon the earth. After the food needs are stabilized, suddenly a new challenge arises. When the widow's son dies unexpectedly, she cries out in despair to Elijah, prompting him to plead with God to revive the young man, and God does so. God was not going to let the demonstration of His reward to the widow's selflessness be overshadowed by anything, not even death.

The New Testament passage tells the story of Jesus raising a widow's son from the dead. The fact that she is called a widow, and the dead boy her only son, indicates to us that not only had she just lost her only child, but she had lost her means of livelihood as well. When such sorrowful events happen, the gospels show us that Jesus is moved to compassion. When the widow's son is being carried out for burial, Jesus felt the woman's grief as keenly as any sorrow He had endured. When He walked over to the bier and commanded them to stop, it must have been confusing to the widow. After all, her son

had just died, and here was a stranger halting the funeral! Jesus then told the son to get up, and the dead boy arose from the bier.

Such a wondrous miracle must have inspired awe, fear, and trembling. After all, such things were heard of in the days of the prophets, but no such thing had occurred for hundreds of years. But while Elijah asked God as a mortal supplicant, Jesus as God on earth simply commanded the dead to arise. It is a subtle, but important, difference. Elijah was human, and as such had merely human powers. All of his divine power came directly through God. Jesus is God, come down among us. His power shows the direct control God has over His creation.

Through these acts of compassion, God inspires us to show love to those in need of help today. I have read of seeing Christ in all people, and it is an inspiring, but difficult, thing to do. To see someone we may dislike, whether it be an annoying sibling or a bitter rival, to look at those people who we would hold in contempt, not with spite or with jealousy but with accepting love, that indeed is truly divine.

It is not always easy to see Christ in people, especially when they are outwardly unattractive. God, however, sees right through our outward appearance, cares for us all, and loves us unconditionally.

When working at the 5000 Club, a ministry that provides food for unfortunate people, I have been able to look at people, hurting and hungry from life's indignities, and have been able to welcome them as friends with a hot meal and fellowship. These are people who, for one reason or another, are on the downward swing of life. It feels good to help them, sharing in their meal and in their laughter, hearing about how James got a new job, or how Ann's sister remarried to a good husband.

My natural impulse has been to look and then to walk away, but through God's grace I am able to see who they really are, to show compassion, and to accept them with love. Such a response is not only necessary, but mandatory. Jesus tells us, "my commandment to you is 'love one another, as I have loved you', and showing God's love to others is what God requires of us. The problem is how to show perfect love with imperfect faith, and this Jesus heals in us as well. Jesus does not only heal physical ailments but also spiritual sickness, and of the two, the spiritual disease is by far the more deadly.

I myself have known that dry, arid desert of the soul. The feeling that when we pray no one is listening, the feeling that church is meaningless, the doubt that God exists, or the questioning of who He would really be if He did. The world can seem so heartless at times, and like the widow, we can have all that we hold dear taken away from us in a moment by a cruel twist of fate.

When Jesus raised the widow's son from the dead, it was not merely an act of kindness, as wonderful as it was. It was also to show us that the troubles of this world that keep us in hunger, doubt, fear or sorrow are things that vanish in the presence of God. We are held down in death by our greed and despair, our pride, and our hatred. We cannot heal

ourselves of this by our own efforts, but must ask God to do it for us. When He does, the resulting freedom is wonderful, allowing us to experience a fuller, richer life. We are revived just as the young men in the scriptures, brought back from a cold, bleak, deathly state, awakened anew to the love and beauty for ourselves and for others that has been God's promise to us from the first.

Amen.