CSI Gethsemane

A homily for 13 AUGUST 2013

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From the left hand of God through my mouth, may these words lift your hearts and minds…

Listen to these names, and see if you can spot the common link:

* Former US President Barack Obama
* Canada’s Minister of Indigenous and Northern Affairs Carolyn Bennett
* Renaissance polymath Leonardo da Vinci
* French heroine Jeanne d’Arc
* Queen Victoria, Prince Charles, Fidel Castro
* Singer Judy Garland, Canada’s own Justin Beiber – the “bieb”.

What do they have in common?

Okay, a few more:

* Hockey player Phil Esposito and tennis player Martina Navratilova
* Former Prime Minister Joe Clark, PM hopeful Michael Ignatieff
* Oh, and I would like to add my own name to this list.

Yes, they are all left-handers. Today, we celebrate all these, and more, as August 13 is International Left-Handers’ Day. Sadly, like many other holidays, left-handers’ day has degenerated into a consumerist frenzy of expensive gifts and fattening meals. I hope no one spent a lot of money on presents for me. If you did, however, please place them just here and I will humbly receive them with thanks.

There is deep prejudice against left-handers embedded in our languages. The English word “left” comes from the Anglo-Saxon “lyft” – which means weak or useless. In French, left is “gauche” – and I am sure I don’t have to translate that. In Latin, left is “sinister” – which the Oxford English Dictionary defines as evil, malicious, underhanded, criminal. On the other hand, the Latin for right is “dexterous” – defined as deft, capable, adroit, agile, nimble, neat, handy, able – and it goes on – skillful, skilled, proficient, expert, practiced and polished.

We talk about human rights, but not about human lefts.

How would you like to be labelled: Weak, evil and malicious; or capable, handy and skilled?

Many of our friends in the Roman church through the centuries believed the Devil incarnate is left-handed. They punished children who showed a tendency towards left-handedness. In kindergarten, I was hit with a ruler by my teacher for favouring my left hand. The Roman’s historic animosity towards left-handed people is surprising considering the man revered as their founder was almost certainly left-handed. I’m speaking of none other than St Peter himself.

I want to offer a practical demonstration of the strong Biblical evidence that Peter was left-handed, drawn from accounts in all four Gospels of the arrest of Jesus. I call this CSI Gethsemane and I have recruited two volunteers to assist in recreating the scene in which Peter confronts a servant named Malthus and chops off his ear with a sword.

The Biblical accounts are clear that it was Malthus’s right ear that was struck by Peter’s sword. Assuming Peter was facing Malthus to prevent him from arresting Jesus, then it would be impossible for a right-handed Peter to strike the right ear of Malthus.

< demonstration here >

So, the first Pope, the first Bishop of Rome recognized by the Roman church is none other than the left-handed St Peter.

Thank you to our crime scene re-enactors. After today’s service, this foam sword will be beaten into a foam ploughshare – as per Isaiah 2:4.

Human beings have long been skilled in the shameful practice of identifying some physical, cultural, or social characteristic as good and Godly, and another as evil and devilish; and then rewarding or punishing accordingly. We build stereotypes about God, and the Godly life, and then enact vengeance on those who fall outside the tight parameters we have constructed.

While I still smart with the memory of that ruler striking my left wrist many years ago, I know that this is mild compared to the abuse, rejection, death, disease and discrimination measured in a thousand brutal ways that many have experienced through misogyny, colonialism, slavery, homophobia and too many other wrongs.

Today’s readings challenge us to think differently. In Kings, God seems to be playing a game with Elijah to challenge divine stereotypes. Wait for me on the mountain, God tells Elijah.

First, a terrific wind blows apart the very rocks – surely this is the all-powerful wind of God.

But no, it wasn’t.

Then, a terrible earthquake – what could be more God-like than a mighty shaking of the very foundations of the earth?

Nope, that wasn’t God either.

And, finally, a roaring fire. Everyone knew back then – and they surely know today – that God speaks with the tongues of fire.

But no, that wasn’t God either.

The Common English Bible translates the arrival of God in Kings as “a sound. Thin. Quiet.” Others offer translations including: “a soft, murmuring sound” and “a still, small voice”. There are theologians, Jewish and Christian, who spend much time in contemplation of what has come to be called the “mysterious sound of fine silence”.

This encounter with Elijah compels us to set aside stereotypes of a raging, raving, fiery God – a stereotype that too many people feel compelled to imitate – and instead embrace a quiet and soft God. That doesn’t mean there is no place for righteous fury, but if holy vengeance is our default position, then we are missing this important truth.

In today’s reading from Romans, Paul demolishes another religious stereotype. He takes on the strongly-held notion that righteousness – the Godly life, the good life – consists of a series of tick-boxes: Do as much of the so-called right things as you can, and do as little of the wrongs, and you’ll wind up in heaven.

In Deuteronomy, the check-list was extensive:

* don’t eat seafood;
* don’t charge interest on loans to the poor;
* don’t mix fabrics in garments; and so on.

Over the centuries, many other items have been added:

* don’t be left-handed;
* don’t be a woman;
* don’t be lesbian, gay, trans, bi-, two spirited and/or gender fluid; and so on.

The brilliant UK theologian Jane Williams, commenting on this passage, writes:

“Paul counsels against turning faith into a new kind of strenuous pursuit, where you have to search out God and grab him to you by force. God is closer to you than your own breath and heartbeat.”

Which takes us to the impetuous Peter in today’s Gospel reading. It is interesting to reflect that Peter, whose name is commonly translated as “the rock”, is anything but rock-like in the Matthew passage – and later when he chops off Malthus’s ear. Filled with impulsiveness, he does some remarkably stupid things – only to have Jesus rescue Peter from himself.

In the Matthew reading, the disciples are emotionally high after the feeding of the thousands. Jesus heads off for some quiet time (hint: think back to the “mysterious sound of fine silence” in Kings). Then a storm starts to whip the boat around, and the disciples grow scared. They become terrified when they think they spot a ghost.

The intensity of the storm is matched by the intensity of the emotions that the disciples feel, and suddenly there’s Jesus. Peter imagines that the force of his enthusiasm for Jesus will carry him across the waves. Everyone knows of Peter’s great love for Jesus, his devotion to the cause, his commitment as a disciple. Surely, all of this is sufficient to carry Peter forward.

But no, it isn’t. It’s not about individual effort, capacity or worthiness – however that is defined.

Jane Williams concludes her reflections on the Matthew passage by saying:

“Christianity is not a system, which some people can use easily and some can’t, and each person can only reap the rewards accordingly… The temptation is to go off looking for challenges to prove your worth to God, and seeking him in the terrifying power of the wind, the earthquake and the fire, because surely silence and the rhythm of your own heart are too small and mundane for God?”

Christians (along with most other humans) spend too much time constructing systems, or exclusive clubs, with endless rules about who is allowed in, and who must be kept out. Our readings today urge us to set this aside, to embrace each other and embrace God in the stillness and quiet of intimacy.

I want to end on a positive, if exceedingly small, note. I’ve mentioned the historic and continuing animus amongst many of our friends in the Roman church towards left-handedness. There was a quiet move to change in 2013 in Mullingar, Ireland. The town’s name comes from the Gaelic words: “the town of the left-hand mill”.

The name comes from a miracle performed by the 7th century monk Colman of Lynn. The local mill was grinding barley for the king, when Colman requested some wheat be ground for the monastery. The mill authorities said it was not possible, but Colman managed to get the millstone to move counter-clockwise (that is – left-handed). He was elevated to the status of saint – and in recent years some in the Roman church have suggested that he should be named the patron saint of left-handed people.

That would be a start to correcting one small historical wrong.

There are, of course, many other historical wrongs built on flawed stereotypes of God and the Godly life. It will take a lot more truth-telling, and reconciliation, to heal those wrongs. Today’s readings encourage us to move forward in hope and filled with the spirit of justice and love.

Thank you.