

Proper 14 (Year C)

8 August 2010

St Paul's, K Street

+ I speak to you in the Name of God: Father, Son, and Holy Ghost. *Amen.*

The first Episcopal church I attended after God in his mercy called me into this communion and fellowship was the campus Episcopal chapel at Vanderbilt University, where I was an undergraduate. That was really the time in which I was formed as an Episcopalian, through classes and Bible studies and through the Sacraments of Confession, Confirmation, and the Holy Eucharist. The formation included a lot of music, as I made a not-entirely-successful transition from Southern Baptist pianist to Episcopal organist and learned this wonderful new Hymnal – which unlike the Baptist Hymnal or the Methodist Hymnal was not called by the name of the denomination, because of course the Hymnal that Episcopalians sing from is called simply *the* Hymnal – and I was introduced to a whole new tradition of choral music.

I took to it all immediately. Unfortunately, I also took to the dark side of my newfound faith, and I was quickly formed in Anglican snottiness. There is so much for us to be snotty about, of course. One of the particular bits of snobbery into which I was drawn concerned a particular hymn. This hymn, I was assured, was puerile, silly, unworthy of being sung by serious people. Its tune was trifling and its text childish.

So we never sang it, and I maintained my snottiness about it for years – right up to the point when a very different music director chose the hymn for a Sunday Eucharist and I found myself singing it – for I am nothing if not obedient, and I will sing whatever is put before me, whatever I might happen to think of it – and the power of this silly, trifling, childish hymn so overwhelmed me that the tears flowed and my voice broke and I could not go on singing:

*I sing a song of the saints of God, patient and brave and true,
Who toiled and fought and lived and died for the Lord they loved and knew.
And one was a doctor, and one was a queen, and one was a shepherdess on the green:
They were all of them saints of God – and I mean, God helping, to be one too.*

And one was an old man without an heir, and one was a virgin who knew not a man.
And both were given incredible promises of a child to be born to them, and when as yet they had not received the promises, from a distance they saw and greeted them.

The writer to the Hebrews tell us that faith – the faith of the saints, in that long roll call of glory to which he devotes the eleventh chapter of his letter – is the *assurance of things hoped for*. Some of you will no doubt remember how that reads in the Authorized Version: faith is the *substance* of things hoped for. Both translations are defensible, because the Greek word can mean both *subjective* confidence and *objective* reality. We generally think of faith in its subjective sense: my faith is my assurance, my conviction, that things are as I believe them to be. But our readings today encourage us to think about faith in its objective sense: not as assurance but as substance. Substance is what sub-stands – what stands beneath. It's the stable and solid understructure, the firm and reliable foundation on which everything else is built. Substance also means reality: earlier in the Letter to the Hebrews, the author says that Christ is the *express image of the Father's substance* – that is, the image of the Father's "very being."

As long as we concentrate on the subjective side of faith – our own conviction or assurance that things are as we believe them to be – we can easily have a notion of faith as something passive and undemanding; and we can give ourselves credit for merely believing things. So I can sing the Nicene Creed with full conviction. Woohoo! Enroll me in the Hebrews Hall of Fame alongside Abraham and the rest!

Hardly. That leaves out the objective side, the stable and solid understructure, the firm and reliable foundation on which everything is built. This isn't the faith of passive and undemanding belief; it is the faith that claims God's promises as present realities. It is a faith that *works*, that *labors*, that *ventures out boldly*; as one commentator has said, it is the faith by which the saints "courageously swung out on the vine of God's promises over the chasms of life, trusting that the vine would hold."

*They loved their Lord, so dear, so dear, and his love made them strong;
And they followed the right for Jesus' sake the whole of their good lives long.
And one was a soldier, and one was a priest, and one was slain by a fierce wild beast:*

And there's not any reason, no, not the least, why I shouldn't be one too.

No reason I shouldn't be one too, because from time to time God has shown me his promises, as I trust he has also shown them to you, or else why would you be here? – I could see them as clearly as you can imagine, saw them in their solidity and reliability and full-blown reality, even though I saw them as yet from a distance. And do I courageously swing out on the vine of God's promises over the chasms of life?

Very seldom.

Do I confess that I am a stranger and foreigner on the earth? Do I desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one?

Maybe occasionally. I may say that I am seeking a homeland, but I do spend an awful lot of time piling up treasures right here, where my heart too often is, and neglecting to build up an unfailing treasure in heaven.

And the thing is, so often God doesn't ask for anything dramatic. Abraham had to set out for a place that he was to receive as an inheritance; and he set out, not knowing where he was going. He had to trust in God for the miraculous heir. But from most of us, most of the time, God asks simply that we do the work he has given us to do, that we do it as people who are seeking a homeland, who look forward to the city that has foundations, whose architect and builder is God. He asks that we be about our business as his servants – dressed for action, with our lamps lit, ready for our master's long-delayed return. Blessed are those slaves whom the master finds alert when he comes.

Blessed – and here is where, in Luke's telling, things take a glorious turn:

“Blessed are those slaves whom the master finds alert when he comes; truly I tell you, he will fasten his belt and have them sit down to eat, and he will come and serve them.”

What can we possibly do to deserve that our master should become our servant, should feed us, should give himself to us? There is nothing, of course, except that our master has peculiar ideas about rewards, and he knows nothing to give us for our trifling service but himself, an unfailing treasure.

I knew a man – he was our choirmaster. He was as little concerned with earthly treasure as anyone I have ever known. And he went about his business, doing the work he had been given to do, quietly, unostentatiously, humbly, building up an unfailing treasure in heaven, where no thief comes near and no moth destroys. Ten days ago, his master came for him unexpectedly, and found him dressed for action, with his lamp lit. And I have faith that the master welcomed him to the table and bade him sit down to eat. And this faith is not merely assurance that it is so. It is the substance of what I hope for, solid and reliable and real, even though I see it as yet from afar. God grant to each of us that when the master comes, he will find us ready.

They lived not only in ages past; there are hundreds of thousands still.

The world is bright with the joyous saints who loved to do Jesus' will.

You can meet them in school, or in lanes, or at sea, in church, or in trains, or in shops, or at tea.

For the saints of God are just folk like me, and I mean to be one too.

Just folk like me – but folk who have their eyes on a better country, a heavenly one, where they will sit at the banquet served by their master, Jesus Christ, to whom, with the Father and the Holy Ghost, be ascribed, as is most justly due, all might, dominion, majesty, and glory, world without end. *Amen.*