

A sermon for the Parish of the Epiphany in Winchester, Massachusetts, preached by the rector, the Reverend Thomas J. Brown, on 24 July 2011, for proper 12 in lectionary year A.

My friend Carol had surgery a week ago. Her doctor was convinced she had ovarian cancer; Carol herself was convinced that she'd not be recovered in time to take her vacation in northern Scotland, a place she loves to visit. Both of them were wrong. There is no cancer, and the laparoscopic surgical technique means that now a week later she's getting ready for August trip to Scotland.

The kingdom of God is like...

Jesus describes it using earthy metaphors that stretch the imagination and expand our heart.

For centuries in the remote highlands of Scotland, people in isolated villages have waited upon the infrequent visits of clergy to perform the sacramental chores that tie up the loose ends and beginnings of life. When children are born, there will be a church baptism, but not until the priest arrives. But life and death and God don't wait. When a woman is giving birth a community gathers. Listen to how it works...from the 1963 diary of a Scottish midwife, given to me by my friend Carol:

When the image of the God of life is born into the world I put three little drops of water on the forehead. I put the first little drop in the name of the Father, and the watching-women say Amen. I put the second little drop in the name of the Son, and the watching-women say Amen. I put the third little drop in the name of the Spirit and the watching-women say Amen. And I pray the Holy Three to lave and to bathe the child and to preserve it to Themselves. And the watching-women say Amen. All the people in the house raise their voices with the watching women, giving witness that the child has been committed to the blessed Trinity. By the book itself ear has never heard music more beautiful than the music of the watching women when they consecrate a child and commit him to God.

(The Celtic Vision: Selections from the Carmina Gadelica, edited by Esther de Waal. St. Bede's Publications, Petersham, Massachusetts, 1988. p. 111.)

The kingdom of God is like...

All of the world's religions have a public face--the official realm where teachings are debated and delivered, where great rituals are performed lavishly, where the giants of the faith are enshrined in stained glass and stone. But in every corner of the globe, within the homes of human beings, and by the hearth, the great tradition is supplemented by what is sometimes called the little tradition. Here is a realm of household gods; rites that accompany the ordinary round--the birthing of babies, the deaths of regular folk, people who are neither prelates nor monarchs.

And you need only go up to Gloucester to hear the men and women who make their living fishing; their chants and prayers are cause for the whole town to gather. Or, you could visit a North End's restaurant to see enlarged on the wall a prayer of an Italian great grandmother, evidently she kept her original version in her apron when she cooked. I suppose some would call this superstitious; I wouldn't. I think it reveals a faith which finds God in the baking of bread, and the sowing of seed.

The kingdom of God is like...

Faith which finds God present to all of life; compassion that seeks God's face in others, assurance that God is working in our daily chores; in commonplace tragedies, and in the ordinary miracles of living.

A great tradition has grown out of the preaching and teaching of a little man from a back water town in the Galilee. Jesus sowed a rich harvest of stories; some he told, some they told about him--but they were little traditions that gave rise to those four extravagant gospels that give our church life, and birds like ourselves a home.

In those gospels Jesus points toward God, not set apart or far away, but God known and named, tasted and touched.

I'm not a baker, but a friend is, and I love that she bestows upon me a loaf from time to time--it's delicious, and it's made with prayer for those to whom she gives it. Yet leaven, is after all, only dead bread. The moldering, decaying bit of old dough, stashed in a dark and hidden place, and from that dying comes energy and power to raise the rest of the lump. It's a little tradition recipe for salvation, from Jesus himself, and it carries the seed of a great tradition.

Into the stuff of the world a Bakerwoman God hides a bit of dead bread. Just add water--the waters of creation, of baptism, of birthing, of tears. Work it through with the muscle only flesh and blood can provide, so that the whole thing is touched by this churning and fermenting. Then wait. The process takes some time. As boring as watching paint dry, or grass grow, or as tedious as loving, or dying when there's no evidence that anything good will come of the prospect. The presence of warm air speeds everything up, breaking down sticky barriers, creating new spaces within the loaf, and lightening the product. The end result is an unmistakable rising.

Such, says the man with the parables, is like the kingdom of God. And he knows for he's the leaven for our own kingdom bread, and the yeast that transforms the fruit of the vine into the cup of our salvation.

He invites us to do the same...which is, to consecrate our whole lives and all of creation by the Book itself, to his own self. We might even become leaven for another, the way he was for his disciples. Meanwhile, he bids us to join him on his dying rising way. So we do, often singing Alleluias as we leave here to transform the world.

And the watching-women say...Amen.