

May I speak to you in the name of God, Giver, Forgiver and Lover.
Amen.

I recently finished the Stieg Larsson trilogy, the Swedish novelist who died at the untimely age of fifty. Centered around the exploits of a journalist and a hacker, Stieg Larsson's books are the perfect tonic for those seeking something a little more than the usual crime thriller. There is crime, and there are thrills, but Larsson's novels also have the added tonic of stepping outside of the usual stereotypes of the genre. While there is plenty of helter-skelter and not a little skulduggery, Larsson's works also engage the mind. He takes a fine scalpel to questions of institutional sexism and heterosexism, and takes no prisoners when detailing how power corrupts. Whether his target is his own profession of journalism or the powers of the state, Larsson's writing is a veritable expose of much that is wrong in contemporary society. And yet, through the investigation of the dark side of society Larsson's trilogy is also a redeeming reminder of the power of the truth to set us free.

This morning's readings made me think of Larsson because they too are about the redeeming power of truth, in this case the truth of God's love for us. For that matter, the passage we heard from Kings this morning has a wonderfully direct parallel in *The Girl Who Played With Fire*, the second of Larsson's trilogy. Without spoiling anything about the book, suffice it to say that Larsson produces a wonderfully inventive twist on the passage from life to death and death to life that we read about in Kings.

Like Larsson, the biblical writers knew what made for good storytelling. Equally, the creators of the lectionary, the calendar that decides where and when we read scripture, are good editors. Today we see juxtaposed to one another three different readings about the passage from violence and death to new life.

I think that for many of us, myself included, there is a tendency in to focus on the love, joy and hope of the Christian story. We tend not to want to focus on negatives like suffering, death and despair. But the fact is that in the bible, like in Larsson, we only arrive at the truth once we have gone through the negatives. In the scriptures it is through two horrific experiences of death and bereavement, in each case involving a child, that the purposes of God are made clear. Both these passages are far more unsettling and disturbing, far more terrible, than anything Larsson has ever written. And yet the terror and the fear of parental loss are what make the story real. While the bringing to new life has an element of unreality to it, the clear emotional agony of the parents in the story commands us to stop and listen and take note. We can imagine just how terrible their loss was. And we can empathize with the parental desire they had that things be other than they are.

But what do we make of the other reading, slyly inserted between those two dramatic accounts of life triumphing over death? What to think about the story of Saul, once a persecutor and destroyer of Christians, later to become the Apostle Paul most responsible for enthusing the world about God's love for them? It is far from accidental that we hear Paul sandwiched between two accounts of life triumphing over death. He too is an example of profound reversal.

I don't know about you but I often struggle with Paul. For one thing he is just so keen. Whether he is persecuting Christians or exhorting them to greater things, he just so awfully showy and earnest. I sometimes wonder what kind of family life Paul had. Maybe he didn't receive a lot of affirmation and love as a child. Indeed one wonders what kind of experiences must have formed Saul to make him the religious RoboCop of the first century.

Then again, if this seems a little harsh, maybe it its worth reflecting on the fact that is precisely because of Paul's clear sense of internal conflict that he has been such a good evangelist. Bertrand Russell noted that only fools or dull people do not submit themselves to continual questioning about whether they are right about the choices they make. Clearly Paul was neither a fool and most certainly not dull. Instead, here in this wonderful passage, we have a leading figure in the earliest church making no bones about the fact that he was spectacularly wrong about the ministry of Jesus.

You have to be able to admire Paul if for no other reason, than for honestly naming his own shame and his own culpability. Paul understood from within just how easy it is to believe something wholeheartedly that is wholeheartedly wrong. And even better than that, Paul takes no credit for upping his game and changing his understanding. For Paul God alone is responsible for opening his eyes and helping him see Christ as life-giving.

Whether we are young in our faith or old in our faith, we too need to learn from these three passages from death to life. But most of all we need to take heart from Paul who was able to realize that he did not need to supply all the answers himself. Instead, Paul discovered that God had already supplied all that he needed.

It is frequently thought that we will become better Christians by having a better understanding of the New Testament, or by reading more books about Jesus, or by spending more time in prayer. And to a certain extent, all these are perfectly acceptable paths to increasing our understanding of God. But until we are able to do what Paul did, and identify the conflicts in our lives where we refuse to allow God in, no amount of reading or praying will really make any difference.

Paul reminds us that Christianity is not a religion of the mind or even of the spirit. Christianity is a religion of the heart's desire, the emotions, the whole of our being. What Paul did, and what Jesus does to those he encounters, is reveal God's presence right at the center of our heart's desire. The heart's desire for a grieving parent was the child. The heart's desire for Paul was to know and serve God. The question for us this summer also has to be what does your heart desire?

God can help you reach your heart's desire if you have a sense of what it might be. God helped the grieving parents. God even helped the leading Christian hunter. If God can help them, God can help us. But for God to help first we need to discern what our heart's desire really is. Amen.