

Sermon by the Rector  
Trinity Sunday, Year B  
June 7, 2009

[Isaiah 6:1-8](#)

[Canticle 2 or 13](#)

[Romans 8:12-17](#)

[John 3:1-17](#)

At the heart of every human person, and at the heart of God, we find a story. In Biblical terms, we might call this story our "word".

We protect nothing more zealously than our word. Bad things happen when we don't. People misunderstand, or misinterpret, or use what we reveal against us, or just don't get it. Sometimes the people we most expect to understand, don't.

That's how it was with Jesus and Nicodemus. "Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things?" asks Jesus. Put more colloquially: "You should already grasp what I'm telling you, but you don't."

On some occasions, our story evokes an expression of understanding that's too quick in coming. "Oh yes, I know exactly what you feel; I know what we're going through". How often have we heard these kinds of comments and thought, "No you don't!?" We guard against false equivalency; we don't speak our word if we think somebody else is going to claim it for their own when it really belongs uniquely to us.

From time to time we fall into a one-upsmanship of suffering, or victimhood. "You think you're going through tough times? I'll put my troubles up against yours any day. They're just as bad, if not worse." Who hasn't heard themselves say this from time to time, in the secret place of the heart if not out loud?

So we're guarded with our story, our word – and with good reason. People don't get it, or they say they get it when they don't, or they pre-empt our struggles by invoking their own. Speaking our word, telling our story, is like casting our bread on the waters, or throwing a fistful of seed into the wind. Who knows where – in what realm of misunderstanding, misinterpretation, misuse – it might end up?

We witnessed an example of our tendency to zealously defend our own story in a few of the reactions to President Obama's speech this past week. Some accused the president of drawing a false parallel between the suffering of Jews in the Nazi era, and that of Palestinians under Israeli occupation. Two commentators discussed this issue on a news show I watched Friday evening. One decried "false moral equivalency"; the other fully and sympathetically acknowledged the validity of this concern, but wondered if setting aside, for a time, the question of the uniqueness of Jewish suffering might open a door to peace.

I have no doubt that the suffering of the Jewish people holds a special, perhaps unique, place in human history. But the second commentator's response moved me, and put me in mind of two Biblical truths.

First: words are meant to be spoken, and stories are meant to be told. Not in any and all circumstances, of course, or without thought, preparation and circumspection. But we're supposed to seek and find occasions to act on our beliefs, and be ready to explain why; to say what we think, and defend our position; to share our own stories with integrity and sincerity, and let others find something of themselves in them. All of this is certainly like casting bread on the waters, or seeds to the wind, but this points us to a second Biblical truth:

We need to be reborn, and rebirth comes through the unpredictable wind of the Spirit. The Spirit blows our word to unexpected places, even through realms of misunderstanding and misinterpretation, but in the end back to us, re-defined – and we are reborn. Haven't we all found, from time to time, that we understand our own story better, more deeply, even anew, through the eyes of somebody else?

I'm thinking this weekend, as are many, of two anniversaries we celebrated this past week. First, D-Day. We can certainly say that the men who stormed the beaches of Normandy on June 6, 1944 spoke a word through their actions and their sacrifice. Or, that they began bringing to an end one story, the nightmare of Nazism, but began telling another. They probably knew they were casting bread on the waters, or seeds to the wind. The meaning of their word, of the story they began to tell, lies with succeeding generations – with ours, among others. Would they recognize our nation today as a fulfillment of the word they spoke, a continuation of the story they began to tell on that awe-ful day of bloodshed and sacrifice sixty years ago?

I'm thinking, too, of the events of Tianenmen Square twenty years ago. I read an article last Sunday by a person who'd demonstrated in the Square in 1989. He said he thought he heard three words spoken in that time that had never been uttered before in Chinese history: "We, the people". Maybe his memory has become a bit romanticized, but it's what he remembers. And clearly, those words were also bread on the waters, seeds in the wind. The clamor of commerce, of people trying to get rich – and soon, of Chinese-made Hummers – seems to have silenced "We the people". Economic freedom? Absolutely. Go for it. Helping forge our nation's political destiny and identity? Leave that to the party.

Still, in the face of words sometimes willfully misunderstood, stories willfully misinterpreted, we believe that God the Father watches over the Word in God's own heart, and in ours, even as the Spirit drives it to places unknown. God does not cease to keep vigil over the story given to each of us, that we might find ways to tell it. The word spoken on the Normandy beaches and in the great public square of Beijing may not yet have found their fulfillment, and may have been repeatedly co-opted, subject to egregious misuse and misinterpretation. But God hasn't finished yet with the story of this nation, or

of modern China. The undivided Trinity holds every human word, all human stories, in its heart. They range far and wide, driven by the Spirit, but find their way back to us, tried and tested, battered and bruised, transformed and illuminated. When they do, we are re-born.