

God at Work!
October 1, 2017 – The Rev. Canon Paul Bresnahan

We cannot ignore the fact that a catastrophic humanitarian crisis is unfolding as we speak in Puerto Rico and the Virgin Islands. These folks have suffered a direct hit from Hurricane Maria. The islands have been utterly devastated. The most basic needs for water, food, medicine are in short supply particularly in the matter of distribution. Power will not be restored perhaps for as long as six months by some estimates. Despite assurances to the contrary, many of us are deeply concerned that help is not quickly getting where it is needs to be.

I have a gnawing feeling that we are watching yet another Katrina in the making. I am ready to be convinced that I'm wrong. But this all strikes close to home. My son David was front and center dealing with the homeless in New Orleans during those dreadful months that unfolded into years at Katrina time. What I am watching now has an all too familiar ring to it. I remember General Honore and his 40,000 troops descending on New Orleans and finally bringing some urgently needed help, perhaps late, but appreciated nonetheless. What we see happening in Puerto Rico and the Virgin Islands before our very eyes, pales in comparison to that response.

In today's first reading we are told that the people quarreled with Moses in the wilderness because there was no water for them to drink. As the situation worsens in the Caribbean, quarrels are erupting between various levels of government.

By the way, as a matter of editorial aside, I feel morally required to point out that none of this has to do with Puerto Rico's massive debt. If I hear another word about that I think I may burst yet another blood vessel somewhere in my already compromised circulatory system. Anywhere in the world where there is such a catastrophe such as this, first save lives, then we ask how we're going to pay for it. Much later! Billions and billions have been voted up for Texas and Florida in the wake of those storms. What about the folks on the Islands? And while I'm venting my spleen here, what about our heroic hot shots and firefighters in the West? Our fire season has been devastating and costly to us too. What about us? We in the west deserve more than a footnote in the nation's attention span.

Please forgive me indulging in some of my own venting, but if I don't do some of that I think I think I run the risk of repressing some of my deeply held humanitarian convictions let alone simple Christian concern for my

fellow human beings. I have many Puerto Rican contacts from New York City, Boston and Lynn. I can report to you that those cities and their Public Schools are all preparing for yet another wave of humanity to descend on the Northeast as soon as commercial flights permit. I am relieved to see that State and Local governments have already begun to mobilize resources. No talk of cost or debt; our brothers and sisters are in trouble and they need us. First responder emergency teams, and folks in tactical communication squads, military and medical fields have already been dispatched to Puerto Rico and the Virgin Islands.. Now to coordinate all this help from the Federal Level is an essential piece. Maybe that's already in place. But I have concerns about how urgently we are focused on this unfolding crisis at the highest levels.

If water will gush out from the rock, if manna will fall from heaven, if meat is to nourish body and soul as it did in the wilderness for the children of Israel, if medicines are to minister to diabetics and others on the Islands, then delivery and distribution systems will need to be provided from the angelic hosts of generous human hearts and bodies from all quarters. This is God at work in all of us!

Today's Epistle is spot on in our present predicament. Isn't it interesting how often that what seems an arbitrary lectionary prepared so many years ago, is in fact so timely. Today we read; "If then there is any encouragement in Christ, any consolation from love, any sharing in the Spirit, any compassion and sympathy, make my joy complete: be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus."

Today's Collect proclaims that God shows "his power chiefly in showing mercy and pity." Folks, as we work out our salvation, we must do nothing less since it is God who is at work in us.

Jesus showed us his power by emptying himself. Defenseless as he was, he got himself into a whole peck of trouble with the Temple Authorities by that business of overturning the tables of the money-changers and hawkers in pigeons and trinkets in the Temple precincts. Today's Gospel is a follow up on that confrontation. The chief priests and elders of the people wanted to know by what authority he was doing these things. As was so often the case, Jesus answered the question by asking another? He says; "Did the baptism of John come from heaven, or was it of human origin?" The question put the authorities in a quandary; they calculated their response among themselves;

"If we say, 'From heaven,' he will say to us, 'Why then did you not believe him?' But if we say, 'Of human origin,' we are afraid of the crowd; for all regard John as a prophet." So they answered Jesus, "We do not know."

So what did Jesus do but to ratchet up the confrontation by telling them the parable of The Unwilling Servant who changed his mind and did the bidding of his Master, while the Willing Servant decided to slough off his responsibilities. So, then comes the obvious follow up question, which of the two did the will of Master? Yes, obviously, the first. Jesus was not politically correct at that point, nor was he very diplomatic but instead took it right to those who exercised absolute authority and power over his life. And so he said; "Truly I tell you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are going into the kingdom of God ahead of you. For John came to you in the way of righteousness and you did not believe him, but the tax collectors and the prostitutes believed him; and even after you saw it, you did not change your minds and believe him."

Of course you know the rest of the story. They showed him no mercy or pity. They certainly did not bend their knees at the Name of Jesus. They were missing the key ingredient of what comprises the Kingdom of Heaven. Not just mercy and pity, not just love and compassion, but embracing the other, the different, the weaker, the poorer as you would those much better off than you.

And so it was that Paul breaks out into this wonderful Hymn, one I love so much to hear sung from our own Hymnal:

"Jesus, though he was in the form of God,
did not regard equality with God
as something to be exploited,
but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave,
being born in human likeness.

And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient
to the point of death-- even death on a cross.

Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the name
that is above every name,
so that at the name of Jesus
every knee should bend,
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,
and every tongue should confess
that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father."

God is at work in you, every one of you. Every time you forgive someone, When you reconcile those at odds or feuding with one another, whenever you love somebody who has made themselves difficult to love, yourself included. When you rise to such an occasion as this Heaven breaks into life and shines like the morning sun.

Not long ago I was in the hospital and I was mixing it up with one of the nurses. That's just the way I am. She said something about my cheerful spirits. I said to her I'm sure there are many who must be grateful for her work and the work of those in medicine. I was a bit taken aback by what she said then. She told me that there were lots of angry people these days. The lack of gratitude, and the anger makes a nurse's shift very long and difficult. How can you be anything but grateful for such a ministry? Cheerfully I shared my gratitude for her work and my love for God. The nurse was delighted if also a bit surprised to hear that I am an Episcopal priest. She was, I think, intrigued. I explained a bit about who we are, we can marry, of course. Our clergy can be male, female, gay, straight and so forth. So too our membership. We are all one in Christ, said I. We had quite a conversation about faith. She was a lapsed Roman Catholic and found what I was saying sensible and refreshing.

I can tell you this, whether you are responding to a hurricane or a heat attack, every single human being on this planet at one time or another is ready to ask or ready to hear about how God is at work in you, in them, or in the world we live in. I have been brought to my knees at the Name of Jesus more than once. If you haven't you will. All of us will sooner or later. I pray that we may make God's Incarnate Love apparent to all while we have this precious gift of life, time and opportunity. People are ready, more ready than you can ever know to hear a kind word. The time is always now to share some measure of the Good News of God.

In the Name of God, the Most Holy, Undivided and Everlasting Trinity. Amen.

Fr Paul.