

Trinity 11, August 11th, 2024

10.30 Holy Communion.

1 Kings 19.4-8, Ephesians 4.25 - 5.2, John 6.35, 41-51

May the words of my mouth and the thoughts of all our hearts be now and always acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our strength and our redeemer.

As I guess many of you will be aware, this year we are, in general, reading through St. Mark's gospel. However, at the moment, we are in the middle of a five-week interlude from St John's gospel. And, as I suspect you will have observed from the section of the gospel that has just been read, this is quite a complicated bit of text, and to separate it from what has gone before and what comes after makes it really difficult to grasp. I am sure those who compiled the lectionary knew what they were doing, but to split this possibly most complex bit of John's Gospel into five chunks in July and August when even the most devout and conscientious churchgoer may well not be in church consistently to hear the readings follow week on week, doesn't seem the most sensible thing to do. Sometimes the Church of England baffles me. But what it does mean for us today is I need to give a brief summary of the readings for the last few weeks, and, to a limited degree, say something about where the text is going over the next couple of weeks.

We moved to John's gospel a couple of weeks ago, with the stories of Jesus feeding the five thousand and of Jesus walking on the water. These filled a gap in the middle of our final reading from Mark the week before. Then last week, we heard how some of those who witnessed the feeding of the five thousand followed Jesus to Capernaum, his home, where they entered into discussion and argument with Jesus. Jesus upbraided them for seeking merely physical food in the same way as the Israelites following the exodus, rather than seeking spiritual food. And in that discussion, Jesus, referring to himself as the Son of Man, claimed that he had come down from heaven, and that all that believe in him would have eternal life. And that reading ended with the verse with which our reading today starts.

Jesus said to them, 'I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.

These days we perhaps don't feel the full force of the imagery and symbolism of bread. For us it is one sort of carbohydrate amongst many, but in Jesus's day it was the staple food and the basis of the diet. Without bread, and the means to make it, there was starvation. And bread, as a concept and in reality, is a basic Old Testament theme. As well as the story of the giving of manna in the wilderness as the bread from heaven, bread was the basic mark of hospitality – strangers were routinely offered bread by their hosts. Bread was offered to God in the regular temple worship. In the Psalms, bread is the basic sign of God's favour and it is an almost ubiquitous theme in the prophets – the withholding of bread a mark of God's displeasure, and the giving of bread as a mark of his acceptance. In our Old Testament reading we have the wonderful story of the prophet Elijah, whose

ministry foreshadowed Jesus' in many ways, being provided with bread by heavenly beings, to give him sustenance for his journey through the wilderness – the similarities of this story with Jesus being tempted in the wilderness are obvious. Finally in this saying, the first of the seven “*I am*” sayings in John’s gospel, Jesus makes the claim that he is the true bread, the one who spiritually sustains and feeds us who we can know through the Holy Spirit. For us perhaps, Jesus, the bread of life, is a symbol of God’s offer of heavenly hospitality and welcome, a sign of God’s approval.

After the reprise of that verse, the lectionary compilers leave out the next few verses, although that isn’t clear from the text as printed in Worship for the Week, for reasons that no doubt seemed sensible to them at the time but seem to me to be simply incomprehensible. In these verses Jesus reiterates and expands on the points he had made already, ending with

This is indeed the will of my Father, that all who see the Son and believe in him may have eternal life; and I will raise them up on the last day.

But after that, those listening begin to grumble and complain. These complaints were, on a basic level, because he was known to them as the son of their neighbours, who really shouldn’t be behaving in this way. This is perhaps understandable – how would you feel if the 30-year-old son of a neighbour that you had known from childhood, who played with your children, returned home and started claiming that he had come down from heaven? And we know from the other gospels that Jesus’ family had similar worries about him. But the complaints were perhaps for the reasons that others were to take up later in the gospel. In referring to himself as the Son of Man, was Jesus hinting at an identification with the apocalyptic figure in the Book of Daniel, who enters into the presence of God, the Ancient of Days. By his assertion that he had come down from heaven he seemed to be claiming divinity in some way. The importance of this to the writer of the gospel was clear and he begins his work with the words we know very well

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was God, and the Word was with God. He was in the beginning with God and without him was nothing made that was made.

And the complaints may well have been caused by Jesus’ use of the phrase “*I am*” – in its context here an echo of an echo of the Divine Name Yawheh “*I am what I am*”. This was of course the same formulation Jesus used in the other six “*I am*” sayings recorded in the gospel – the good shepherd; the door of the sheepfold; the light of the world; the way, the truth and the life; the true vine and the resurrection and the life, all of which describe attributes of God in some way. It is very easy to get an overdose of symbols and metaphors from a reading of John’s gospel! On at least some occasions, these too caused offence, as some of you might possibly remember from when I preached on “*I am the Good Shepherd*” a few months ago. I rather doubt you do, but preachers can but live in hope.

Incidentally, we can see a similar set of images in John Newton’s hymn that opened the service.

*Jesus! My Shepherd, Brother, Friend
My Prophet, Priest and King.
My Lord, my Life, my Way, my End,*

accept the praise I bring

Such a multiplicity of symbols and metaphors is needed to capture something of who Jesus is.

But back to the text. In response to the listeners complaints, Jesus doesn't address them directly, but doubles down on what he has already said, and adds more, in something of a circular argument that goes around the subject a number of times, and indeed extends into next week's reading. First, he seems to suggest that not all will respond to him – a somewhat barbed comment to his listeners.

No one can come to me unless drawn by the Father who sent me.

But of those who are drawn to him, he repeats what he has already said

Very truly, I tell you, whoever believes has eternal life. I am the bread of life.

In the last verse of today's reading, he again uses the symbolism of bread, and claims that he has come from heaven

I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats of this bread will live for ever;

And finally, in terms almost intended to shock.

the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh.'

Here we have a suggestion of human sacrifice, cannibalism perhaps – profoundly disturbing for Jews for whom human sacrifice was the abhorrent practice of the surrounding tribes in earlier times. Of course, we associate these words with Jesus' death and resurrection, and we use similar words week by week in our communion services. Our familiarity here tends to soften the shocking nature of the words for us. But that wouldn't have been the case for his hearers in the gospel account. In next week's reading we will Jesus takes these ideas further and talking of his followers eating his flesh and drinking his blood, ideas that were later to find their final expression at the Last Supper and are repeated at each celebration of the Eucharist. But words that were frankly offensive to some who heard them and would, over the coming centuries, lead to charges of cannibalism being made against the early church. And many did take offense, and we will see in the next two weeks many of the wider crowd of followers couldn't cope with them and ceased to follow him.

And Jesus still has the power to cause offense. For some of the followers of other monotheistic religions the idea that God could "*come down from heaven*" and take human form is shocking and blasphemous. Many of the followers of Jesus in countries around the world are suffering because of that. Both those who are offended and those suffering because of the offence, need our prayers. But it is offensive to many in the affluent west too, in its challenge to what is perceived as intellectual and rational truth that would see God as a human construct. There are those who find the idea of resurrection laughable, accusing Christians of living in the Middle Ages. And some would see Christianity as, at best, a further example of the myth of the dying and rising god found in other religions. Such ideas even find there way into the church – the cult of modernity from the 1950s to

1980s that sought to strip the gospel of the “mythical” as it was termed, to present Jesus as a merely human teacher; or the post modernity of the turn of the century, that encouraged a subjective consideration of Jesus’ life and teaching to find one’s own truth, rather than something revealed by God. It was ever thus. Paul wrote a few decades after the passion and resurrection

We preach Christ crucified—which is offensive to Jews and foolishness to Greeks

Perhaps more significantly, Jesus’ words challenge the modern concept of autonomy – that we can achieve all we want by ourselves and need no outside agency to help us achieve our goals. But in stark, and for some offensive, language, the message of Jesus is that we are all sinners and stand in need of forgiveness and reconciliation, and that the death and resurrection of Jesus is the way that that forgiveness is achieved, and which leads to eternal life. and the way to appropriate that is through belief in Jesus as Lord and Saviour.

T. S. Elliot expresses some of these thoughts in rather more eloquent language.

*Why should men love the Church? Why should they love her laws?
She tells them of Life and Death, and of all that they would forget.
She is tender where they would be hard, and hard where they like to be soft.
She tells them of Evil and Sin, and other unpleasant facts.
They constantly try to escape
From the darkness outside and within
By dreaming of systems so perfect that no one will need to be good.
But the man that is will shadow
The man that pretends to be.
And the Son of Man is crucified always
And there shall be Martyrs and Saints.*

The listeners in the gospel complained about what Jesus was saying, that he was the Son of Man, the one who came down from heaven, that he was the Bread of life, the only way to the Father. They simply could not accept it and turned away. And it sadly seems to be so for many today.

At the start of the gospel John was to write

Jesus came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God.

In a similar time of controversy and argument recorded in Luke’s gospel, Jesus said

Blessed are they who take no offence at me

For those who do believe, who are open to the Holy Spirit in their lives, for those who need sustenance and strength to follow the way of God, Jesus is the bread of life; for those who need comfort and protection from the things that assail them, Jesus is the good shepherd, the door of the sheepfold, the place of safety; for those for whom the way ahead is dark and unclear, Jesus is the light of the world; for those who feel alone, and cut off from friends and neighbours, he is the true vine onto which we are grafted; for those unsure

about the way their lives should take, Jesus is the way, the truth and the life; and for those facing the imminence of death, He is the resurrection and the life.

Now to him who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, for ever and ever. Amen