

## **Sunday 23 August: Eleventh Sunday after Trinity**

**“Lord to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life.” (John 6.68)**

**Readings: Ephesians 6.10-20; John 6.56-69**

One of the nice things about holidays is coming back with energy and everything seems fresh again. I’ve loved Morning Prayer this week. On Monday we started reading the Book of Proverbs and each day we have had a treat of readings in praise of wisdom and insight. “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge” (Prov. 1.7). We humans don’t flourish if we get above ourselves. We need to reverence the creator and creation to find our proper place within it. Get it right with wisdom and insight and there’s life in all its fullness. The odd thing is that even though we know it, so often we don’t do it and turn our back on wisdom. We have an extraordinary ability to behave in ways that are stupid and unwise.

I have also enjoyed reading the early chapters of Mark’s Gospel as the second reading at Morning Prayer with their stories about the call of Christ and discipleship. Again it’s a message of life, in which people are healed and find their true place with God and one another through the activity of the Jesus, the Son of God. It’s so straightforwardly life-giving that it doesn’t make sense that people turned their back on what Jesus had to offer because in some way he was felt to be a threat to them.

There’s the same pattern in today’s readings. For several weeks on Sundays we’ve been working our way through the letter to the Ephesians and John chapter 6 about Jesus the bread of life. As well as acknowledging the spiritual blessings of Jesus Christ, Ephesians draws explicitly on the Jewish tradition of universal wisdom and insight given to us in Christ. In one of the great images of the New Testament we are told to, “Put on the whole armour of Christ”; and that armour is a mix of simple virtue and Christian Godliness.

“Put on the whole armour of God, ....  
and fasten the belt of truth around your waist, and put on the breastplate of righteousness. As shoes for your feet put on whatever will make you ready to proclaim the gospel of peace. With all of these, take the shield of faith, with which you will be able to quench all the flaming arrows of the evil one. Take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.” (Ephesians 6.14, 15)

There is wisdom and insight here and we know it’s where our health and wellbeing lie. You don’t need to seek worldly power. The belt of truth and whatever will make you ready to proclaim the gospel of peace on your feet combine with the spiritual gifts to make us into ambassadors for Christ. What matters are the sorts of things we admire and find so hard to be and do. Perhaps Sundays, like holidays, help us to live more simply and straightforwardly?

In John’s Gospel for a month we’ve been reading about Jesus the bread of life: the feeding of the 5,000; the bread of heaven, like manna in the wilderness for the life of the world; Jesus’s saying, “I am the bread of life” and his total identification with the work of God – “I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats this bread will live for ever”. Its conclusion today is that by eating this bread we will abide in Christ, just as Christ and the Father abide in one.

As the signs of Jesus unfold in John’s Gospel, and knowing the wisdom and work of God in the Scriptures and in our own lives, it’s difficult to understand what’s going on in the passage where the conflicts emerge not just with the world around but with his own disciples. It is the

total identification of Jesus with God that makes what Jesus is saying so difficult for his disciples, “That many of his disciples turned back and no longer went about with him.” To conventional Jewish believers, Jesus as God was a blasphemy. So Jesus asked the twelve, “Do you also wish to go away?” Now I sometimes feel like that about the Church which can be difficult and hard to go on along with but not often about Christ. But I recognise that for many people it’s the intellectual difficulties of believing in Jesus as God as well as a good and great human being, the metaphysics and doctrine of Christian belief, that make it hard for them to come along with him.

There was a great piece of radio last night on Radio 4, the first of three discussions between an atheist, Dr Miranda Fricker, and a bishop, Richard Harries, the former Bishop of Oxford. They tackled some of the really difficult issues of life with enormous grace and interest in each other, in such a way that they helped each other to make the best possible case for their own beliefs. Miranda Fricker repeatedly commented that religion marks the key turning points of life better than atheists have so far been able to do. One of the people they interviewed described his mother’s funeral, she an atheist, he an agnostic. He had taken her to the Dignitas clinic in Switzerland and assisted her dying. Yet he was deeply grateful and moved that his mother’s neighbour, a parish priest, offered the parish church for her funeral at which the priest and a Humanist took part. Confusing? Yes, I should think so, but kind, generous, helpful, certainly.

I quite often come across people who can’t believe in God but who think that Church does rites of passage better than anywhere else. I have also sometimes thought that I would still want to be part of church even if I didn’t believe in God because the experience of community here is like nowhere else. Where else is there such open hospitality making for such a diverse community? People are getting interested in this now and evidence is being collected that shows that people who go to Church in the UK feel happier and healthier than the population at large. The marriages of practising Christians stand more chance of lasting. Government recognises that the religious faiths make community like no one else. In which case the question is if it works, why don’t more people recognise there must be an underlying truth here?

There’s a degree of resignation in Peter’s reply, “Lord, to whom can we go?”, before a much stronger affirmation, “You have the words of eternal life.”

Caught up in the life of God, at one with Christ, we are enlivened by the Spirit of God. In a life that sometimes feels like a battle between good and evil, in which we get caught up in forces bigger than ourselves, amazing things can happen when we keep alert, put on the whole armour of God, and live simply, truly, peacefully, hopefully; with energy, wisdom and insight. It is the way of life.