

Sunday 26 July: Seventh Sunday after Trinity

A Continuing Miracle

Readings: Ephesians 3.14-end; John 6.1-21

**May he give you the power through his Spirit
for your hidden self to grow strong,
so that Christ may live in your hearts through faith,
until you are filled with the utter fullness of God.**

In the name of God, Source of all being, Eternal Word and Holy Spirit. Amen

Now that I live in South London I often travel by bus and notice that on buses someone carrying a baby has a huge effect on the rest of us. People stand up, for a start – which is rare enough – but it's more than that. Grown men soften while young women start to gurgle and make faces and laugh.

We are drawn to children in a way which pulls us together – their terrible power to charm us, to fill us with hope at all the potential there is hidden in that tiny bundle – and their awful vulnerability and need – utterly dependent on the love and care of others to survive and thrive. They fill us with hope for the future of our world on the one hand and with anxiety on the other – is this going to be a world worth living in? In Emma and Sophie May and Hannah being baptised today we see all that and we see ourselves too for Jesus tells us we are to be as little children, created in the image of God yet vulnerable, needing God's care and undergirding of our lives to survive at all.

Today's Bible readings are for people like us, storm tossed yet longing to be faithful, hungry yet longing to be filled, filled with joy that children are joining our family, a bit concerned for what may lie ahead for them and for us.

In the Gospel reading from John the people are in a new Exodus – they have been drawn out into the wilderness to hear Jesus as the people of Israel followed Moses out of Egypt into the desert, and now they have no food. The resources they have at their disposal are meagre – barley loaves – the food of the poor – and dried fish – and these are the rations of one small child. No wonder they are hungry! **I wonder where our hunger lies?**

Jesus shows himself to be a new Moses – he provides a superabundant meal from these meagre resources just as Moses enabled his people to find the manna sent daily by God, a sticky white substance found each morning on the desert floor preventing Israel from starvation as she journeyed. Jesus fulfils the law – one greater than Moses is here. And he fulfils the role of Elisha the prophet to whom the Lord said, “they shall eat and have some left over” – 12 baskets of scraps are here, enough food for all twelve tribes of Israel – one greater than Elisha is here. Jesus fulfils the expectation of the prophets. No wonder the disciples had been doubtful! I wonder where our doubt lies?

And then Jesus moves even beyond Moses and Elijah. The scene changes to a dark and stormy sea. The disciples are in the boat and in danger and Jesus comes towards them to help. It is I he says – or rather I am, the name in the old testament filled with divine resonance. I am that I am, the divine name. Jesus is Yahweh himself present on earth. I am – do not be afraid! A powerful strand of story telling in the old Testament relies for its power on God

creating dry land out of a watery chaos which was inhabited by monsters of the deep. The sea was therefore a fearful place representing chaos. Of what are we afraid? I am with you, says Jesus, do not be afraid!

Well that's all very well in the pages of the Bible but how does that work for us now? Isn't it all rather theoretical? How do we arrive 20 centuries later at the state described in Ephesians as growing in strength and depth and love, filled with all the fullness of God. I know I am rather prone to quoting Lionel Blue, but that's because he is so very honest about the human condition, and so a groan of his comes to mind here! All very well all this interior castle stuff, climbing up stair after stair to God consciousness. Never mind the castle of awareness and vision – most of us are swimming around in the moat in fear of drowning, just trying to keep swimming at all! How do we know Jesus then?

We have to take a step of belief as these parents and godparents are taking on behalf of their children today. Belief in what?

That on the night before he died Jesus, gathered together with his friends, took bread and wine. It was near the Passover so Jesus was saying here is another divine meal, a new way of taking you from self-absorption and fear and into confidence and freedom, a new exodus from bondage, a new liberation into hope, a new journey with friends, a new way into seeing God. And taking bread he blessed it as he did at the feeding of the 5000 and gave it to his disciples and said, take eat, this is my body which is given for you, do this is in remembrance of the offering of myself for you and be thankful.

After supper he took the cup of wine and said this is my blood which is shed for you, offer yourselves in service one to another as I have to you, and be thankful.

In other words the feeding of the 5000 has not stopped but goes on and on if we will put down our hunger and scepticism and fear – if we will eat. Dr Rowan Williams put it like this at a recent meditation for the general Convention of the American Episcopal Church:

“Life is proclaimed not in our achievement, our splendid record of witness to God, but in our admission of helplessness and of the continuing presence and lure of death in our lives (like the hunger and the sea in today's readings). To be able to speak of this and not to retreat in fear or throw up defences, is part of true life (in other words let the defences down, tell God that all we have is two miserable loaves and a few small fish!) It is to know that our name is spoken by the Word of God and that we do not have to battle in resentment or anxiety to create an identity of our own. (That's how we are like these children being baptised today – they cannot make up their identity and nor can we, it is at least in large part given to us).

Our identity says Dr Williams is already there. We are already called friends. We are already bound to each other and our life is invested in each other – in those we see and those we don't, in those we like and those we don't. We are in the holy place with Jesus, a holy nation, a royal priesthood – already.

At the Eucharist, we state who we are and where and why. We give voice to all that makes us childlike – our hunger and our helplessness. We name death – the hunger and the chaos – in us and around us. We give thanks that we are called from emptiness to life, and our own true names are spoken by the Word.” (Dr Rowan Williams, Church Times, 17/7/09, page 9)

It is the same continuing miracle there for us!

In a moment Nick and Katherine will give Emma and Sophie May and Hannah their true name in Christ. And this is not one of those party games where we are on the outside looking in, wishing we had everything, wishing we could win! When their names are called ours are called too – we are part of one family in God who says to us, kindly, “I am – do not be afraid”.

Amen.