

Readings for the Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost

8th August 2021

First Reading: 2 Samuel 18:5-9, 15, 31-33

The king ordered Joab and Abishai and Ittai, saying, "Deal gently for my sake with the young man Absalom." And all the people heard when the king gave orders to all the commanders concerning Absalom. So the army went out into the field against Israel; and the battle was fought in the forest of Ephraim. The men of Israel were defeated there by the servants of David, and the slaughter there was great on that day, twenty thousand men. The battle spread over the face of all the country; and the forest claimed more victims that day than the sword.

Absalom happened to meet the servants of David. Absalom was riding on his mule, and the mule went under the thick branches of a great oak. His head caught fast in the oak, and he was left hanging between heaven and earth, while the mule that was under him went on. And ten young men, Joab's armour-bearers, surrounded Absalom and struck him, and killed him.

Then the Cushite came; and the Cushite said, "Good tidings for my lord the king! For the LORD has vindicated you this day, delivering you from the power of all who rose up against you." The king said to the Cushite, "Is it well with the young man Absalom?" The Cushite answered, "May the enemies of my lord the king, and all who rise up to do you harm, be like that young man."

The king was deeply moved, and went up to the chamber over the gate, and wept; and as he went, he said, "O my son Absalom, my son, my son Absalom! Would I had died instead of you, O Absalom, my son, my son!"

Second Reading: Ephesians 4:25-5:2

Putting away falsehood, let all of us speak the truth to our neighbours, for we are members of one another. Be angry but do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, and do not make room for the devil. Thieves must give up stealing; rather let them labour and work honestly with their own hands, so as to have something to share with the needy. Let no evil talk come out of your mouths, but only what is useful for building up, as there is need, so that your words may give grace to those who hear. And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with which you were marked with a seal for the day of redemption. Put away from you all bitterness and wrath and anger and wrangling and slander, together with all malice, and be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you

Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children, and live in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.

Gospel: St John 6:35, 41-45

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

Then the Jews began to complain about him because he said, "I am the bread that came down from heaven." They were saying, "Is not this Jesus, the son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know? How can he now say, 'I have

come down from heaven'?" Jesus answered them, "Do not complain among yourselves. No one can come to me unless drawn by the Father who sent me; and I will raise that person up on the last day. It is written in the prophets, 'And they shall all be taught by God.' Everyone who has heard and learned from the Father comes to me. Not that anyone has seen the Father except the one who is from God; he has seen the Father. Very truly, I tell you, whoever believes has eternal life. I am the bread of life. Your ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness, and they died. This is the bread that comes down from heaven, so that one may eat of it and not die. I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats of this bread will live forever; and the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh."

A Reflection for the Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost

As I mentioned last week, in this part of our lectionary cycle, our Gospel readings focus on Jesus' teaching on the theme of bread. Last week, we saw that the feeding of the 5000 is a sign that God in Jesus is the one who provides the bread of heaven, that which satisfies our spiritual hunger. This week's Gospel reading begins where last week's left off, with Jesus' statement:

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

And Jesus returns again to reinforce what he is saying at the end of today's Gospel:

I am the bread of life. Your ancestors ate manna in the wilderness, and they died. This is the bread that comes down from heaven... Whoever eats of this bread will live for ever...

Jesus is telling us that he is the embodiment of revelation from God, the one who fulfils and surpasses the Torah – the manna or law of Moses that the Jewish people understood as bread from heaven.

If we have been a Christian for some time and are familiar with the Gospels, it can be difficult to comprehend the enormity of this statement, of how astounding it must have been to his original audience. Those who come to Jesus, who believe in him, have eternal life because Jesus is the bread of life – and it is clear that Jesus is referring here to spiritual life since he says in the middle of today's Gospel that those who come to him will be raised up on the last day.

'I am the bread of life' is the first of the seven 'I am...' sayings in John's Gospel, key statements about who Jesus is, which encompass a wealth of meaning that needs unpacking.

Just as we need material bread, food, to sustain our physical life, so we also need regular spiritual meals to sustain our spiritual life. Jesus gives us such spiritual meals through prayer, the reading of God's word, through the Eucharist, but also through fellowship with other Christians and through our service in Christ's name. Jesus tells us that if we eat of this spiritual bread, we will not hunger or thirst.

Jesus' audience struggled with his teaching and, indeed, started to complain. I am sure there are times when we have all thought we have known about something and then have been surprised. For Jesus' audience that day, and for many people since then too, Jesus' statements about himself have caused more than surprise - they have confounded and upturned their world view. How can Jesus say that he has come from heaven? How can he make claims that

indicate that he is the Messiah? How can he promise eternal life? He is someone just like us, we know his family...it's just not possible.

Their difficulty is that they are looking at Jesus in human terms and their view is too small. But how do we manage to take a wider view? One commentator said of John's Gospel:

The Evangelist's way of reporting the teaching of Jesus does not seek to convince by logical argument, but rather to invite readers to reflect on truths which, by their very nature, lie beyond reason and pertain to mystery.

We need to accept the mystery of God that is beyond the scope of human understanding. Rational argument and attempts to prove or disprove God will fail. Nevertheless, we can experience the truth of God's love and God's presence with us in ways that we cannot explain but which satisfy our spiritual hunger and thirst, as Jesus promised.

Jesus' response to his audience was that they, and we, need God's help in believing. Jesus says: 'No one can come to me unless drawn by the Father who sent me.' This should be understood in an inclusive, not an exclusive manner. It does not suggest that some are not drawn by God. God's invitation is open to all. The word 'drawn' is linked to the word 'come' – both are required, so we need to accept God's invitation to 'come' to Jesus. And Jesus goes on to remind us that God will help us in our believing; drawing on the prophet Isaiah, he reminds us that we will be taught by God.

To be taught by God also helps us to address the other challenge we face: the challenge of living out the reality of being God's people. We taste and see God's goodness, but struggle to live out that goodness, to be imitators of God. This struggle is not something new. Human frailty has meant that God's people have always struggled to live up to God's standards. In last week's passage from St Paul's letter to the Ephesians, Paul started by begging them to lead a life worthy of their calling. In this week's reading, he urges them to be imitators of the love of God: because of the love and forgiveness that has already come through Jesus Christ, they, and we, are called to live lives of love.

Paul describes some of the important values that characterise that life of love: truthfulness, honesty, diligence, kindness, tender-heartedness, forgiveness. He also stresses the importance of avoiding 'evil talk', bitterness, slander, malice – the negativity and gossip that can slip into our conversations all too easily. And he speaks of anger. Not that we shouldn't be angry, for there is a place for righteous anger that Jesus demonstrated in his life, but that anger should be well-managed and short-lived; we should have self-control.

We need to practise these values individually and collectively, even though we don't always agree, and even though we will often fall short. As we heard last week, as Christians we are called to be one body, and today we hear that we are called to be imitators of God. We are all God's children, made so by the work of Jesus, and we need to bear the family likeness. Our life together should show others what God is like.

That communal life together is a great blessing but should never be taken for granted. Our Old Testament reading today shows us what can happen as a result of a family feud that gets out of control. Absalom, King David's son, had tried to usurp the throne, threatening David's life and resulting in the fierce battle in the forest of Ephraim, in which many thousands died, which we hear of in today's reading. One of the victims was Absalom. David won the battle but lost his son, and his lament would have been but one of many that day. It is a reminder, should we need it, to

keep working at those values that make us imitators of God's love, that our Christian family relationships always need working at.

To return almost to where I started, the spiritual 'bread of life' Jesus gives us through prayer, the reading of God's word, through the Eucharist, through fellowship with other Christians and through our service in his name, brings us into relationship with God and one another. Those relationships are not simply about knowing more of God; they entail participation in a way of life that requires a deeper commitment, but which will satisfy our spiritual hunger and thirst and show God to the world.