

## Readings for the Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost

22<sup>nd</sup> August 2021

### First Reading: 1 Kings 8:22-30, 41-43

Then Solomon stood before the altar of the LORD in the presence of all the assembly of Israel, and spread out his hands to heaven. He said, “O LORD, God of Israel, there is no God like you in heaven above or on earth beneath, keeping covenant and steadfast love for your servants who walk before you with all their heart, the covenant that you kept for your servant my father David as you declared to him; you promised with your mouth and have this day fulfilled with your hand. Therefore, O LORD, God of Israel, keep for your servant my father David that which you promised him, saying, ‘There shall never fail you a successor before me to sit on the throne of Israel, if only your children look to their way, to walk before me as you have walked before me.’ Therefore, O God of Israel, let your word be confirmed, which you promised to your servant my father David.

“But will God indeed dwell on the earth? Even heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain you, much less this house that I have built! Have regard to your servant’s prayer and his plea, O LORD my God, heeding the cry and the prayer that your servant prays to you today; that your eyes may be open night and day toward this house, the place of which you said, ‘My name shall be there,’ that you may heed the prayer that your servant prays toward this place. Hear the plea of your servant and of your people Israel when they pray toward this place; O hear in heaven your dwelling place; heed and forgive.

“Likewise when a foreigner, who is not of your people Israel, comes from a distant land because of your name—for they shall hear of your great name, your mighty hand, and your outstretched arm—when a foreigner comes and prays toward this house, then hear in heaven your dwelling place, and do according to all that the foreigner calls to you, so that all the peoples of the earth may know your name and fear you, as do your people Israel, and so that they may know that your name has been invoked on this house that I have built.

### Second Reading: Ephesians 6:10-20

Be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his power. Put on the whole armour of God, so that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. For our struggle is not against enemies of blood and flesh, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places. Therefore take up the whole armour of God, so that you may be able to withstand on that evil day, and having done everything, to stand firm. Stand therefore, 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.

Pray in the Spirit at all times in every prayer and supplication. To that end keep alert and always persevere in supplication for all the saints. Pray also for me, so that when I speak, a message may be given to me to make known with boldness the mystery of the gospel, for which I am an ambassador in chains. Pray that I may declare it boldly, as I must speak.

Gospel: St John 6:56-69

Jesus said to the crowd: "Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood have eternal life, and I will raise them up on the last day; for my flesh is true food and my blood is true drink. Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them. Just as the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father, so whoever eats me will live because of me. This is the bread that came down from heaven, not like that which your ancestors ate, and they died. But the one who eats this bread will live forever." He said these things while he was teaching in the synagogue at Capernaum.

When many of his disciples heard it, they said, "This teaching is difficult; who can accept it?" But Jesus, being aware that his disciples were complaining about it, said to them, "Does this offend you? Then what if you were to see the Son of Man ascending to where he was before? It is the spirit that gives life; the flesh is useless. The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life. But among you there are some who do not believe." For Jesus knew from the first who were the ones that did not believe, and who was the one that would betray him. And he said, "For this reason I have told you that no one can come to me unless it is granted by the Father."

Because of this many of his disciples turned back and no longer went about with him. So Jesus asked the twelve, "Do you also wish to go away?" Simon Peter answered him, "Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and know that you are the Holy One of God."

**A Reflection for the Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost**

August has, somewhat unexpectedly, turned into rather a busy month for me, not least because of the building work that has been taking place in St Mary's. But I have also received a variety of different invitations. This past week, I had the not altogether welcome invitation to visit the dentist to continue some long-standing work on my teeth. However, most of the invitations have been of the happier sort and I have enjoyed the company of a number of different people. This coming week, I am going to be away for a couple of days having accepted an invitation to celebrate my aunt's 90<sup>th</sup> birthday. Such invitations, many welcome and joyful, others perhaps less so, are all part of life's rich tapestry.

Today is the fifth Sunday where our Gospel reading comes from the sixth chapter of John, and Jesus' teaching on bread (we return to Mark's Gospel next week.) - the feeding of the 5000 showing Jesus' divinity; Jesus as bread from heaven who satisfies our spiritual hunger; Jesus the bread of life who gives eternal life; and, last week, Jesus who gives his flesh as bread for the life of the world, and the links with our Eucharistic thanksgiving.

Once again, the first few verses of today's Gospel repeat the end of last week's reading, in effect summarising and reinforcing the whole chapter:

Just as the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father, so whoever eats me will live because of me. This is the bread that came down from heaven, not like that which your ancestors ate, and they died. But the one who eats this bread will live forever.

This is Jesus' invitation to those that would follow him. The bread that he offers now eclipses the physical provision either of the loaves and fishes, or of the manna received in the wilderness, and it brings the hope of eternal life to

the world. It is an invitation to participate in a relationship with Jesus that is the parallel of His own relationship with God the Father. To accept that invitation, to share in the bread of life, all that is needed is to believe in Jesus.

But that believing is the sticking point for many people. After these opening verses, the narrative moves from Jesus addressing the crowd that had followed him to Capernaum and focusses in on the disciples; not the twelve of the inner circle, but the wider group of his followers. In previous weeks, we have heard of the people grumbling and arguing about Jesus' teaching as they struggled to understand him. Now even his disciples say 'this teaching is difficult; who can accept it?'. And we are told they start to drift away.

What was it that made them leave? Were they horrified by the idea of eating flesh and drinking blood, especially, as I mentioned last week, the Law forbade Jews consuming blood? Or was it Jesus' claim that he came down from heaven to offer the bread of eternal life like manna in the wilderness, that he claimed a unique relationship with God? The reason is not clear.

What is clear is that some people were unable to accept Jesus' invitation. And that's something that's also very recognisable in our own society. Many people today want to rationalise faith, to find certainty or proof, but that is simply not possible. As it says in this passage, 'It is the Spirit that gives life; the flesh is useless.' Here, flesh refers to our humanity, to the limitations of human understanding. So, people who want to keep faith within the limits of their human understanding fail, it's too difficult, and they also start to drift away. But we are told 'the Spirit gives life'; it is God the Holy Spirit who enables us to believe despite the lack of certainty or proof.

In Jesus' time, as now, there were plenty of alternatives for those engaged in the spiritual search. The spiritual dimension is recognised by many people as part of what it means to be human. It is human nature to yearn for something that, as people of faith, we would call God. We don't use the set psalms as part of our liturgy in our congregations. However, in the psalm set for this morning, Psalm 84, the psalmist expresses this beautifully:

How dear to me is your dwelling, O Lord of hosts! My soul has a desire and longing for the courts of the Lord;  
my heart and my flesh rejoice in the living God.

In our own individualistic times, people still feel that yearning, but many feel unable to subscribe to the teaching of the church. Some people describe themselves as 'spiritual but not religious'. And they pick and choose the parts of various spiritualities and religious beliefs that suit them. They want it on their own terms, not God's terms. Christian teaching is too difficult. Like some of those in today's Gospel, they cannot accept Jesus' invitation.

And so, in our Gospel, Jesus finally turned to his closest group of friends, the twelve, and asked them 'do you also wish to go away?' He could be asking 'Are you also refusing my invitation?' Peter responds on their behalf: 'Lord, where can we go?' These few have recognised that none of the alternatives will satisfy. And then comes their statement of belief, not rationalisation, but belief: 'We have come to believe and know that you are the Holy One of God.' They accepted the invitation.

To those who accept Jesus' invitation, God gives the resources needed for the journey. In the letter to the Ephesians, the writer acknowledges that the Christian life can be difficult. Indeed, it is portrayed as a conflict between good and evil, and the resources that God provides are described as armour. The armour is the full set. God provides everything that we need: truth, righteousness, the Gospel of peace, faith, salvation, the Word of God, and with prayer to undergird everything.

Solomon also knew the value of prayer. In the Old Testament reading, we heard part of Solomon's prayer at the dedication of the Temple. The preceding chapters describe the building and furnishing of the Temple, and how the Ark of the Covenant was brought to the inner sanctuary of the newly finished Temple. The quality of the building, with no expense spared, and the many sacrifices that accompanied the Ark of the Covenant, are an indication of how seriously the Israelites took their decision to serve God at that point. In his prayer, Solomon acknowledged God's steadfast faithfulness to His people, and also prayed that God would hear the prayers offered in the Temple by all-comers so that 'all the people of the earth may know your name and fear you.' It's the Old Testament equivalent of praying that all people will come to believe that Jesus is the bread of life and accept his invitation.

The invitation I have accepted to my aunt's birthday celebration this coming week, like many of the invitations we receive, is a one-off invitation to a one-off event. The invitation from Jesus is an ongoing invitation, just as belief is ongoing. Jesus' invitation is given again in every Eucharist. And we accept again, we re-state our belief, each time we come to receive the life-giving bread of communion.