



Revd Ro's Reflection on The Tenth Sunday after Trinity

Proper 14 Year B

Ephesians 4. 25-5.2

John 6. 35,41-51

Our Reflection this week begins with Jesus' famous, 'I am the bread of life' saying. During the time of enforced lockdowns people have had time to develop their hobbies. I was able to focus on my garden and it really is looking lovely. I watched a programme with Chris Packham last evening. He was walking by the side of the river Itchen to Winchester Cathedral. It was an area where he had spent much of his youth. I admired his frankness and what he said at times brought him near to tears. Two of the things he spoke of I agree with completely, the healing power of nature and particularly our relationship with and love of our pets.

Apart from the garden I have had time to read and I went back to a book I must have read for the first time some twenty five years ago. It was David Adam's 'On eagle's wings, the life and spirit of St Chad.' Much of what we know of Chad is gathered from Bede's Ecclesiastical History of the English People. There is one part of the book where Chad and his brothers are being educated by St. Aiden on the Island of Lindisfarne. The lads are playing a ball game and whoever catches the ball is required to say one of the famous 'I am' sayings of Jesus before throwing the ball to his partner. Whether or not the lads ever did this is neither here nor there, it serves to show the centrality of these sayings in the teaching of Jesus and therefore their education. Each priest before going out on mission would have to have learned a gospel by heart. Usually it was the gospel of John, hence the title of the book. John of all the gospels is packed full of theological teaching. Our passage is no exception.

I remember saying in one of my Reflections how, when I was an English teacher looking at a piece of literature, I would draw a cross section of an onion on the board and the students would work out the layers of meaning contained in the image, or passage and put them on the diagram. I think that today's gospel passage is like that, it is so rich in meaning.

We remember from last week that Jesus, referring back to his feeding of the five thousand with the loaves and fishes, says that it is not enough for the people to follow him because they want food,

nor yet because they hope to see signs. The signs point to Jesus as God's anointed one. He is the one who holds the key to the bread of life, the bread that will never perish. Jesus states quite clearly that he is the one upon whom God 'has set his seal.'

Jesus as he feeds the crowd in the wilderness is doing what, in the Old Testament Scriptures God himself does. It was not Moses that gave the bread in the wilderness, it was God. Now Jesus gives bread in the wilderness. It takes us right back to Exodus. Jesus is doing as God did because he is of God. John, throughout his gospel, is at pains to make Jesus' divinity clear to his readers. God provided manna in the wilderness not just as physical food but as spiritual nourishment. Jesus gives just that.

³⁵ '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.'

Our passage for today misses out a few verses that really are vital to our understanding.

³⁶ 'But I said to you that you have seen me and yet do not believe. ³⁷ Everything that the Father gives me will come to me, and anyone who comes to me I will never drive away; ³⁸ for I have come down from heaven, not to do my own will, but the will of him who sent me. ³⁹ And this is the will of him who sent me that I should lose nothing of all that he has given me, but raise it up on the last day.

⁴⁰ 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.'

The crowd have seen Jesus, they have heard his teaching, they have seen signs which are miraculous but still they 'do not believe'. This passage is a direct parallel to the beginning of the gospel,

^{1.11} 'He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. ¹² But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God,'

Many do not believe but to those who do accept him, who turn to him and live in his way Jesus gives the promises of God.

³⁷ 'Everything that the Father gives me will come to me, and anyone who comes to me I will never drive away;'

What are the gifts of God?

⁴⁰ '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.'

This is not a parable; this is not metaphor or image. This is straight talking. It is a clear exposition of what Jesus offers to all who believe in him and live in his way.

Eternal life is not only spiritual existence with God after death. What Jesus offers is the life which begins now, the minute we believe in him and turn to him. It is a new life, a new quality of life, lived in Jesus. It is also life after death and resurrection life on the last day, it is to be part of the eternal life of God's new creation, his plan for the world. These words are so rich in meaning. This is the promise of God and there is only one access to these riches: through Jesus Christ.

As Christians we need to understand that the wonderful life with Jesus can begin now, if we live in the truly Christian way. That means putting away self and not doing our own thing and pretending it is Christian.

It is hard hitting but that is what Jesus offers to his followers. He offers it to the Jews who stand before him in this passage. But like the Israelites in the wilderness in Exodus, 'the Jews began to complain.' Complaining often led to a turning away from God. That is what the crowd here is doing. Why do they complain?

‘because he said, ‘I am the bread that came down from heaven.’⁴²They 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”?’

It takes us right back to the synagogue at Nazareth and Jesus saying that a prophet is never accepted in his own country. ‘This can’t be the Messiah; we know his mother and Father!’ Well they don’t know his heavenly Father and they are too blind to realise he has come from God.

‘Do not complain among yourselves.⁴⁴No one can come to me unless drawn by the Father who sent me; and I will raise that person up on the last day.’

The Jews might be God’s chosen people but they are not special in themselves. God draws people to Jesus’ way in their hearts. It is those who accept the freely given grace of God in Jesus who will receive the fullness of life. People must ‘turn from sin and turn to Christ’ Jesus does not force himself on anyone. Human beings have free will but,

^{1.12}‘But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God,’

There it is in a nutshell at the very beginning of John’s gospel.

⁴⁵‘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.⁴⁶Not that anyone has seen the Father except the one who is from God; he has seen the Father.’

Jesus’s quite specific in this passage ‘I have seen the Father.’ The passage is packed full of statements like this. John wants his readers to be quite clear about the nature of Jesus. He is the incarnate God, the word made flesh. He is the promised Messiah. Jesus brings the promises of God and he is offering them to all who turn to him. John makes it clear that without God taking the initiative humanity was helpless, God sent his only Son, as John puts it in chapter 4.

‘God’s love was revealed among us in this way: God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him.’

Jesus states clearly that he is from God because he has ‘seen the Father’ because he is ‘from the Father.’

The invitation is there “I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.’

⁴⁷ ‘Very truly, I tell you, whoever believes has eternal life.⁴⁸I am the bread of life.⁴⁹Your ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness, and they died.⁵⁰ This is the bread that comes down from heaven, so that one may eat of it and not die.⁵¹I 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.’ We see how important those words ‘I am the bread of life’ are, they are repeated twice. This is not like the Israelites who ate the manna in the wilderness, they died. Eat the bread of Jesus and you will receive eternal life in him.

‘The bread that I give for the life of the world is my flesh,’ The Jews would not have understood these words of Jesus then, John’s first readers would have done as would every Christian since. It takes us to Calvary and Jesus’ supreme sacrifice of his life given in love for the world. Jesus is not simply speaking of individual salvation, though of course this is what he offers to all who truly turn to him, to all who live in his way.

‘Whoever eats of this bread will live forever; and the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh.’

Jesus' death and passion are clearly referred to here. As we read this passage we think of the Last Supper where Jesus teaches his disciples about what his sacrifice will mean. He breaks the bread and he tells them that his body will be broken for them. We think of the bread of Holy Communion and the words "Take, eat this is my body which is given for you, do this in remembrance of me." 'The life of the world' is such an important phrase. Jesus brings salvation for all his followers, but Jesus also brings in God's new creation which will be perfected at the end of time when Jesus will return in triumph to rule over all. The word 'flesh' takes us right back to the beginning of John's gospel.

'And the word became flesh and lived among us' as no doubt John intended that it should.

The passage set for next week's reading follows on directly. Jesus expands the theme of his death and its effects on those who follow him. The passage looks at Jesus' sacrifice and the theme of Eucharist is expanded.

In our reading from Paul's letter to the Ephesians last week, Paul wrote of the unity of all Christians within the body of Christ. We are members of that body, Christ is the head. The members must work in unity and for the good of all if the body is to be healthy. Each person has unique God given gifts to use in his service. Another way of looking at it is to see it as a ship. The crew all have their appointed roles and the ship would soon end up in trouble if each person did not exercise that role efficiently for the good of all.

^{4.15}'But speaking the truth in love, we must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, ¹⁶from whom the whole body, joined and knitted together by every ligament with which it is equipped, as each part is working properly, promotes the body's growth in building itself up in love.' We saw that love and care for one another was the key. This links to our gospel reading. It is not enough to have faith in Jesus. We must live in his way. Our lives must be turned around, re-tuned to Christ. We think of the rich man who wishes to follow Jesus, but who, when he hears the instruction to give up everything and 'follow me', sneaks away and leaves Jesus. It is not just riches, of itself there is nothing wrong with money, what is wrong is anything which becomes more important in a person's life than following Jesus. He is the cornerstone, the focus. So many people through the ages have called themselves Christians but have gone their own way, doing what they want, that is not acceptable says Paul. Our reading last week ended at verse 16 this week's begins at 25 but the passage that is missed is important. Notice our reading begins, 'So then.'

¹⁷ 'Now this I affirm and insist on in the Lord: you must no longer live as the Gentiles live, in the futility of their minds. ¹⁸ They are darkened in their understanding, alienated from the life of God because of their ignorance and hardness of heart.'

It is interesting that Paul emphasises it twice with the words, 'affirm' and 'insist on' you can't get a stronger instruction than that. These people have turned to Jesus, they are new Christians, and they have faith in him. That is the first stage BUT it is only the first stage, as I said now our behaviour must reflect the fact that we are Christians. You must turn from your old ways, says Paul. 'Gentiles' here refers to those outside the church of Jesus Christ. When you think of the pagan practises they would have been used to as the norm in their old lives you can understand how life in Christ is so different.

¹⁹ 'They have lost all sensitivity and have abandoned themselves to licentiousness, greedy to practise every kind of impurity.'

The instruction to live in love, putting the needs of your neighbour at the forefront, is a direct contrast to the old ways.

²⁰That is not the way you learned Christ! ²¹For surely you have heard about him and were taught in him, as truth is in Jesus. ²² You were taught to put away your former way of life,'

So then they must 'turn from sin and turn to Christ' they must put off the old ways as you would throw away an old garment. It is important to remember that the newly baptised person when welcomed into church would wear a white robe. This symbolic action still remains to this day in the christening gown. So then after turning to Jesus a new way of life is required,

²³'to be renewed in the spirit of your minds, ²⁴and to clothe yourselves with the new self, created according to the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness.'

This is what leads into our reading and Paul begins with the words 'So then,' or all this being understood. How must a Christian act? Our reading outlines this, it is not idealistic, it is a practical guide for these new Christians. It applies to us and all Christians. Expediency has no place in the church of Christ. It is not our own way we should follow but Jesus' way and there can be no excuses, no self-deception or indeed deception of others. Blade straight truth and honesty of character is the first requirement here.

²⁵ 'So then, putting away falsehood, let all of us speak the truth to our neighbours, for we are members of one another.'

Just stop and think about it, how can any relationship founded on deception flourish, even more so in the church which is the body of Christ? No, honesty is the bedrock that Paul underlines. Honesty and truth in love for one another are the foundation stones here. Christ is our pattern.

Here is the practical bit,

²⁶'Be angry but do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, ²⁷and do not make room for the devil.'

It is quite obvious that this is not 'pie in the sky idealism,' these are instructions for real life lived in Christ. People will get angry, it is a human emotion. Sometimes people are angry with good cause. If something wrong is being done we try to stop it and are angry with the person who is doing it. So then, be angry but in moderation, have it under control and as it says in the old translation, 'never let the sun go down on your wrath.' It is a good guide. Sort out your differences, forgive as Jesus has taught and begin again: a good recipe for any relationship but certainly in the church.

I remember on my first day of teaching an old stager took me aside. I will never forget his words, 'Ro you will at times need to get cross with a youngster. Deal with the situation. Sort it; make it clear that it is not to happen again, and then forget it ever happened. Close the classroom door on it and next time you see that student the slate is clean.' Good advice and I took it not only in my teaching life but in life in general. Paul is saying, more or less the same. Stand up for what is right, never collude and then when you have made your point move on. Anger that festers is no good, it is destructive in a relationship, in a church, a community and indeed it is self-destructive.

Christianity is open to all. There are no barriers any more, no divisions of race or status. So then ²⁸ '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.' It is strange to see these words in referring to a Christian community. But go back to Calvary and the thief on the cross. He turned to Christ at the very last and acknowledged his wrong doing and the justice of punishment. He humbly asked forgiveness and was assured of it. We are assured of forgiveness if we turn away from our wrong doing. That is the key. People make the mistake of thinking you can say sorry and then just carry on

as before. To 'repent' means to 'turn away' from the sin. We 'turn from sin and turn to Christ' Christians turn to a new way, Christ's way.

Instead of thieving, says Paul, give to others. Jesus turns the old ways on their head. He brings in the new way as he brings in the new kingdom with its values.

²⁹'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. ³⁰And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with which you were marked with a seal for the day of redemption.'

Evil talk makes us think of cursing and so on but actually evil talk comes from an evil heart. Jesus and Paul have warned against the evil from within being born in what is said: gossip, slander, lies, and cruel comments. The list is endless; well all that has got to go. Love is the key, build up a person, build up the church, and do not do anything to diminish, to destroy. Malice has no place in a church or in a true Christian. It's hard hitting stuff but we all need to take note of this. So many times I have heard the expression, 'Oh well it's her way' when someone does something which is unpleasant. Well that is not acceptable, it's just an excuse. Also the desire to have our own way at the expense of others won't do either. Our way must be Jesus' way.

³¹'Put away from you all bitterness and wrath and anger and wrangling and slander, together with all malice, ³²and be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you.'

Paul lists all those things that would have been acceptable in their old pagan lives but are no longer. They have got to be jettisoned and Christ's new way of love followed. I think those words; 'be kind to one another' are beautiful. 'Love' is a word that has so many meanings and yet in English the one word covers it all. Yet 'be kind' is simple enough. We can follow that. It is a good instruction. Anything that is not kind is not acceptable.

Think of the Lord's Prayer, 'Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us.' If we do not forgive, how can we expect forgiveness? That does not mean we do not condemn the sin but we forgive the sinner. That is hard but it is what we strive for. But Paul expects that those who have done wrong will turn away from the sin and change their ways. He is outlining the way forward for this fledgling church. The only way forward is Christ's way.

^{5.1} 'Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children, ² and live in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.'

Paul reiterates Christ's commandment given at his last meal with his disciples. 'Love one another as I have loved you.' This is exactly what this means. Jesus loved us so much that he gave his life for us. There he won salvation for us. Love is the key note of it all. Where there is love there is no malice, no fear, nor cruelty. There is no seeking after power over others.

⁵'Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,

⁶ who, though he was in the form of God,...

humbled himself

and became obedient to the point of death—

even death on a cross.'

This is our pattern says St. Paul there is no greater love than this. Humility, in love must be our guide. This takes us back to the passage from John's gospel:

^{6.51}'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.'

In the words of the hymn,

'I am the bread of life; you who come to me shall not hunger.' Suzanne Toolan.

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