



Revd Ro's Reflection on The Ninth Sunday after Trinity

Proper 13 Year B

Ephesians 4. 1-16

John 6. 24-35

Our reading last week dealt with two miraculous incidents, the first (a story found in all four gospels) Jesus' feeding of the five thousand people who had come to listen to him by the side of the lake and secondly as the disciples row across the Lake in the evening squall, his coming towards them in the darkness walking on the water.

Our reading this week follows on from this. Jesus and the disciples have left the area and gone to Capernaum. The next day when the crowd realise Jesus has gone they follow in boats. These are the same people whom Jesus has fed with the five loaves and two fishes.

It is an amazing thing that the crowd took the trouble to follow him to the north shore of the Sea of Galilee. It shows what a stir this young teacher is causing. Jesus however, in answer to their question, 'Rabbi, when did you come here?' rebukes them in a very forthright manner. 'You aren't looking for me because you saw me performing signs but because you got a good meal!'

I guess in a hand to mouth society when many lived to produce enough food for their family's next meal this was quite true. The people are looking only at the surface, they are seeing things awry.

²⁷'Do not work for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures for eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you.'

Jesus goes straight to the heart of it. It is not the physical food that matters, but that which 'endures for eternal life,' that is 'the bread of heaven' the word of God. Nothing can destroy that. Jesus brings that word and he is the key to eternal life

This always reminds me of that other comment of Jesus from Matthew chapter 6. The sentiment is exactly the same.

¹⁹ 'Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal; ²⁰but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. ²¹For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.'

These people have got to adjust their viewpoint. It is not the fact that they got food, nor is the point that they saw a great sign. The point is that the signs point to Jesus 'the son of man' who will give them the true bread which, as the above passage states, is the true treasure. They have got to look at things from a different perspective to begin to glimpse the true meaning.

It is a bit like what John Kennedy said in his inaugural address, 'And so, my fellow Americans: ask not what your country can do for you — ask what you can do for your country. '

Or switch your viewpoint.

So says Jesus 'Don't look at ephemeral surface things, things that will perish. Look to me and I will give you the eternal bread from God.' For it is on him that God the Father has set his seal.' Jesus could not be clearer. I am the genuine one. The seal is like a hallmark —if you want to know whether something is really gold or silver or just ordinary metal dressed up to look like it, then you search for the hallmarks. The stamped marks which say —this is the genuine article. There were enough would-be messiahs going about claiming to hold the truth but only one is genuine. The one on whom God has 'set his seal' Jesus Christ.

Things start to look hopeful when the people say,

'What must we do to perform the works of God?' Excellent, this is what they should be asking and ²⁹'Jesus answered them, 'This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent.'

That is the right perspective. Look to Jesus, he is the one who is from God. He holds the key to eternal life; he is bringing in God's new perfected creation. Jesus must be the focus.

Sadly the reply shows how far away they are from either understanding or believing,

³⁰'So they said to him, 'What sign are you going to give us then, so that we may see it and believe you? What work are you performing?'

On the surface they are demanding proof, as if they haven't seen enough signs. Jesus does not do signs to order; for one thing Jesus calls miracles 'signs' because a sign points to something. The signs point to him as sent from God. The people want proof and faith is not about proof. They are looking at the signs as focus not at Jesus. It's a bit like a person who is writing an essay on a work of literature who reads so many critics' opinions they forget to look at the book itself and therefore miss all the wonder of it.

The people refer back to Jesus' miraculous feeding the day before. ³¹'Our ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness; as it is written, "He gave them bread from heaven to eat."

Indeed the parallel is right in that we do connect this passage with Moses leading the people from slavery in Egypt at the Exodus. The feeding of the five thousand is meant to take us right back to that. Moses led the people, but he was God's instrument and servant. Moses did not free them, God did. Moses did not provide the manna, God did.

³² 'Then Jesus said to them, 'Very truly, I tell you, it was not Moses who gave you the bread from heaven, but it is my Father who gives you the true bread from heaven.'

The actual signs are only pointers to the one God has sent, that is Jesus, Jesus who does nothing of himself but always in the power of his Father.

³³'For the bread of God is that which comes down from heaven and gives life to the world.' ³⁴They said to him, 'Sir, give us this bread always.'

Jesus then gives us the first of his famous 'I am' sayings.

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. '

Nothing could be a clearer statement of who Jesus is and it takes us right back to the beginning of the passage.

²⁷'Do not work for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures for eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you.'

Jesus is the Son of Man; Jesus is the long awaited Messiah, the anointed one: not only Israel's true king but the king of the created order with his Father. The way to God is through Jesus Christ. Remember that Jesus had left this very crowd because they had tried to make him King, a king in their image. A conqueror that they imagined would use violence to overturn the established order. Well Jesus is the King but his kingdom is of God, God's way is not the people's way. He will bring in a new way which will overturn the established values. He will replace hate with love, war with peace. His Kingdom values will be those of his Father's Kingdom which he will establish on earth. We need to go back to these words.

²⁸'Then they said to him, 'What must we do to perform the works of God?'

The answer is simple, believe in Jesus. Then ask what can I do to live in his way? Living it out is anything but simple. Being a Christian is tough, Jesus' way is not the natural way it is a new way which turns the old values upside down. This is the new way we must follow. When the cross was put on our foreheads at our baptism it was the seal of Jesus. Just as with a hallmark it says, this is the genuine article. It cannot be seen like a hallmark can, the only way it can be seen is in our lives and what we do. Jesus points to his Father, we point people to Jesus.

The wonderful thing is that Jesus never leaves us. 'I am with you always until the end of time.' The Holy Spirit is here with us and free in his creation. We call on our God in our prayers and we know he is with us always.

³⁷'Everything that the Father gives me will come to me, and anyone who comes to me I will never drive away; ³⁸for I have come down from heaven, not to do my own will, but the will of him who sent me.'

We are heirs of God's promises and we need to live our lives so that people are drawn to Jesus. That is the challenge to us as it was to the first Jews to whom Jesus gave the message of God.

So how to live life as a Christian - well Paul provides the answer to this in the passage from Ephesians. This address to the fledgling church in and around Ephesus tries to spell it out.

I remember a sermon I gave once about the Christian life, Jesus gives us the pattern, much as a cook gives a recipe with a method to follow. You can't pick and choose; you need to use the correct ingredients and follow the instructions. If you don't you will end up with something but it won't be the dish you wanted to create. Just so with Christianity - try to manipulate it to your way, miss out Jesus' key commands and it simply won't be his way any longer, it will be your way.

^{4.1} 'I therefore, the prisoner in the Lord, beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called.'

Here is Paul, a prisoner in Rome, giving instructions to them and reminding them of his teaching of Jesus Christ. It has another meaning too. Paul is the willing servant of his Lord; he has been taken captive by Jesus.

I love the way he uses the word 'called.' We are all called - not just priests and ministers, all have their calling. Firstly we are called to the membership of the church of Jesus Christ - we are the church. The calling that we all have is to focus on Jesus Christ as God and king and to make him the centre of our lives.

Jesus Christ has lived out the plan of God, he has conquered death and sin and he has won salvation for all who believe in him. We as Christians are co-heirs with Jesus and inheritors of God's promises. This must be the central focus and it is the Christian's focus and calling. We say it week by week in the creed.

The focus for these new Christians, as for all followers of Jesus, is to have faith in him and try to live in his way. Paul now outlines that way.

Probably if you were asked to write down Jesus' central commandment you would answer, 'Love one another as I have loved you.' So it is not surprising that Paul, as he outlines the way forward for the church, begins with the words, ²'with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love,'

Well if Christians did that they would not go far wrong! Sadly it is not always the case. I think we all need to read these words carefully and ask – do we do that, in the church, in our families, in our communities? Jesus expects no less. Paul lives in the real world; this is not idealistic in any way. It is the way of Jesus. Jesus did not collude when he saw things that were wrong, he stood up against them and against the people who were doing it, but he did everything in love. So must all who follow him, ³'making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.'

This makes sense because to live in harmony as one mirrors the harmony of the trinity.

⁴ 'There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, ⁵one Lord, one faith, one baptism, ⁶one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all.' Paul has pointed this out previously when he made it quite clear that there is now no Jew or Gentile but all are one in Christ. We are all called to be Christians, baptised into the one holy church of Jesus Christ. Unity then is central to that. It is so sad that those who have caused division throughout the centuries have ignored these words which are at the core of Christianity. Of course today there are so many different Christian traditions and many Christian denominations. There has been so much fracture and splintering. However, unity does not necessarily mean uniformity. People will always worship God in their different ways and traditions. We do need to put unity and fellowship at the centre in the spirit of peace.

Paul warns against faction, division and all that goes with it. Nothing will destroy a church community more surely. Love, peace and unity, these must be the key.

What follows is maybe the most complicated part of the passage

⁷ 'But each of us was given grace according to the measure of Christ's gift. ⁸ Therefore it is said, 'When he ascended on high he made captivity itself a captive; he gave gifts to his people.'

⁹(When it says, 'He ascended', what does it mean but that he had also descended into the lower parts of the earth? ¹⁰ He who descended is the same one who ascended far above all the heavens, so that he might fill all things.)

Paul is speaking of Jesus, Jesus who was with his Father at creation, Jesus who at his incarnation came down and walked with humanity, Jesus who at his death and resurrection destroyed the power of death and won eternal life for us. At his ascension to his Father he sent down the Holy Spirit and so empowered his followers with the gifts of God. Jesus by his life, death and resurrection and ascension has fulfilled all things in God's plan.

The Holy Spirit of God equips us through the grace of God. We all have God given gifts, we are all different. Paul expresses this in several places in his epistles. We are the body and Christ is the head. Just as the parts of the body perform different functions so do we as members of Christ's body, the church. All are of vital importance if the body is to function properly.

¹¹'The gifts he gave were that some would be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, ¹²to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, ¹³until all of us come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ.'

Here Paul concentrates on the gift of ministry and teaching. His focus is on building up the early church and teaching the message of Jesus Christ. We all have different gifts, all are to be highly valued, and they are God given. The spirit of superiority has no place within the church. Paul returns to the idea of unity of purpose. I have said that there were many would-be 'messiahs' around, those who were all too willing to mislead people for their own power and self-aggrandisement. Well says Paul, to be tricked by them won't do.

¹⁴'We must no longer be children, tossed to and fro and blown about by every wind of doctrine, by people's trickery, by their craftiness in deceitful scheming.'

These Ephesians have been shown the truth of Jesus Christ, they have left the old ways and turned to him, so they must hold steadfastly to that faith. Their calling is to focus on their King Jesus. That has such implications for the way of life they must follow. It is true of all who call themselves Christians.

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.' The focus is on truth and love, the central Christian values. Jesus is the head, the church is the body. Each of his followers, the members of his body, must work for the good of the whole. We are united as one under Christ, says Paul, so then work for the unity and health of the whole. The only way to build up the church of Christ is by love.

'There is only one God, there is only one King, there is only one Body. Bind us together in love.'

Bob Gillman.

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