

What Draws Us 11th August 2024, St Leonard's Denmark Alison Kershaw

Sunday after Pentecost between 7 and 13 August [19] B

1 Kings 19:4-8; Psalm 34:1-8; Ephesians 4:25-5:2; John 6:35, 41-51

*Through the written word and the spoken word may we know your Living Word,
Jesus Christ our Saviour, Amen*

We are now in the third of five weeks of readings from John's Gospel on the bread of life – and in the Hebrew Bible, Psalms, and Epistles we are also being thoroughly immersed in stories and images of hunger and thirst, sustenance and refreshment.

In 1 Kings we find Elijah in the wilderness retreating from Queen Jezebel who is angered by his efforts to bring the people of Israel back to God. In despair he has collapsed in body and spirit, to the point of wishing to die. But an angel twice comes to him with cake and water bidding him to eat and drink 'otherwise the journey will be too much for you.' This journey of 40 days and nights to Mt Horeb – or Mt Sinai – where Moses received the commandments, echoes the 40 years of Exodus, and prefigures Christ's 40 days of trial in the wilderness. To undertake this difficult journey to the holy mountain the body requires nourishment. And with the kindness of angelic hospitality comes spiritual encouragement and strength.

In Psalm 34: "O taste and see that the Lord is good: happy are they that hide in him." As well as food and drink, we are offered shelter – and we might remember Jesus' invitation to the weary to rest awhile before continuing the journey.

In the *Letter to the Ephesians* we are once again called to be as Christ to one another. Ours are the angelic hands that help others to their feet, provide safe shelter, and offer that most ordinary yet profound manna of tea and sympathy. For me, sharing a pot of tea with a friend is one of life's essentials – and many are the questions, joys, and problems that have been dwelt on over pots of tea and biscuits without number. Next door to my family home in Sorrento, lived a retired farming couple from Wongan Hills. Doris took great pride in her collection of teacups - each trio was different though all were floral, and guests got to choose their favourite. She delighted in the ritual of tea pouring and the plying of sandwiches, cakes and candied ginger. One afternoon, after tea and a tour of the garden with Bill, Doris (who did most of the talking) volunteered the secret of their long marriage – "never let the sun go down on your anger" she said. My extremely young self didn't know then that this maxim came from the *Letter to the Ephesians*, but what a practical piece of counselling it is. How often have you been uneasy and restless and deeply unhappy until you can make peace with someone you have tangled with – if not before sunset, then as soon as feels right. For "we are members of one another" in the body of Christ – the body that is also bread to us – the sustaining stuff of life. The ideal described in this letter is of a society marked by peace, happiness, and care – this is not a naïve vision, but a teaching that springs from an acknowledgment of the shadow side of our lives together – *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. We are to live in love, as Christ loved us. To live in love - this is our choice – a choice that colours every day.*

In the Lord's Prayer – the Prayer of Jesus - we ask for the essential gifts of daily bread and forgiveness. In the words of a modern version - a sung Celtic Mass for Peace¹ -

*Today may there be food for the human family,
and the whole earth community.
Forgive us the falseness of what we have done,
as we forgive those who are untrue to us.
Do not forsake us in our time of conflict
But lead us new beginnings.*

It is a prayer that expresses our needs and longings in both body and spirit – for daily bread and daily acts of love and forgiveness. It is a prayer that garners strength from the divine source for our well-being, nourishment for the journey ahead, and courage to act in the world, to preserve the earth, and live in service of one another.

But what compels us to this point – why do we feel the need to pray like this – why are we not just content to live a self-serving existence - why do we care about anything – why do we not thrive on conflict and relationship dramas (though some may seem to, it's hard to believe they are truly happy). It seems we have an innate hunger and thirst for

kindness and harmony that drives us forward, and so we look to Jesus as the living essence of this self-giving compassion, we choose the Christ way to sustain us. *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."* I see this belief not as an excluding code, but as faith in a path that leads to abundant life. Jesus makes a series of such "I am" statements in John's gospel – I am the true vine, the door, the light, the good shepherd, the resurrection, the way, and the truth and the life. You sometimes read or hear people saying that *I Am - Yahweh* - is the Hebrew name of God – but this is misleading. Richard Rohr explains:

"... God said to Moses: "I AM Who I AM" (Exodus 3:14). *God is clearly not tied to a name*, nor does God seem to want us to tie Divinity to any one name. Which is why, in Judaism, God's statement to Moses became God's unspeakable and unnamable identity. Some would say that the name of God literally cannot be "spoken," only breathed. Now that was very wise, and sometimes I wish we had kept it up. This tradition alone should tell us to practice profound humility in regard to God, who gives us not a name, but only *pure presence*—no handle that could allow us to think we "know" who God is or have the divine as our private possession."ⁱⁱ

And so when Jesus says *I am the bread of life*, or *the true vine*, he gives us not one name, but several paths into this mystery – this unspeakable yet breathable mystery. He goes on to say *No one can come to me unless drawn by the Father who sent me*. At first I was a little puzzled by this as it seems the opposite of the later 'I am' statement: *I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. If you know me, you will know my Father also*. (John 14: 6-7) But on reflection they are not opposite in meaning – I think the first lays behind the second. First we are drawn to, and then we encounter, and then we participate in the mystery of Christ. The initial impulse - how we are drawn is a mystery in itself. One of my favourite mystics, 17th century priest and poet, Thomas Traherne, puts it like this:

I have found, that things unknown have a secret influence on the soul ... [as iron is drawn to a magnet], so is there in us a world of love to somewhat, though we know not what in the world that should be. There are invisible ways of conveyance by which some great thing doth touch our souls, and by which we tend to it. Do you not feel yourself drawn with the expectation and desire of some great thing?ⁱⁱⁱ

I saw on Revd Sue's blog for this week that she was also taken by the concept of being drawn - her thoughts follow on from Traherne's and I found at lot to recognise in myself:

... for many of us, is this not our experience? That we came to faith by some strange force of attraction and curiosity, because of a need for meaning, because of a felt need to be saved from ourselves and other forces, by being surprised by delight and fascinated by wonder? ... God draws us into relationship by invitation, by seduction, and by placing within the character of humanity an appetite for meaning and intimacy, for wonder and delight, for hope and joy, and for peace and belonging. We are a hungry species and God is a generous and intimate creator who provides us with food, with the daily bread, with the bread of heaven, in word, in the person of Jesus and in sacrament.^{iv}

For what do you hunger and thirst? What draws you, not only here to church, but to engage with life and other people, or indeed to solitude and silence. As we get older it may seem harder to keep that sense of curiosity and hold onto this delicious sense of exploration, possibility and potential – but it needn't be so, as the bread of heaven continues to provide and sustain us for the journey. Jesus promises that *Whoever eats of this bread will live forever*. We might think on eternal life not in terms of infinite linear time after death, but as the mystics speak of it – as the eternal moment – what Rohr calls the 'pure presence' of the divine life incarnate that encompasses all that has been and what will be. The quality of eternal life can raise us up, and fill our daily lives – we can choose to eat this bread and drink from this spring – we can live every moment in this love and be satisfied – even as "some great thing" draws us ever closer.

O taste and see that the Lord is good, Amen

ⁱ *A Celtic Mass for Peace: Songs for the Earth*, composed by Sam Guarnaccia, lyrics by J. Philip Newell, 2008

ⁱⁱ Richard Rohr, *An Unspeakable Name*, Centre for Action and Contemplation, 21st September 2020, <https://cac.org/daily-meditations/an-unspeakable-name-2020-09-21/>

ⁱⁱⁱ Thomas Traherne (*c1637-1674*), *Centuries of Meditation. I 2*

^{iv} Redv Sue Lodge-Calvert, *Being Drawn to the Holy One*, Companions on the Way, Blog Year B, 7 Aug 2024. <https://www.companionsontheway.com/post/being-drawn-to-the-holy-one>