

**Sunday 26<sup>th</sup> August 2018**  
**Trinity 13 (B)**

**Liverpool Parish Church**

**OT: Joshua 24.1-2a, 14-18**  
**NT: Ephesians 6.10-20**  
**G: John 6.56-69**

As many of you know, a few weeks ago we flew out to Sicily for our holidays. The draw of Sicily is perhaps greater than you would think: it may not have the sophistication of Tuscany, but it has been at the centre of European food supply and culture for thousands of years. Some of the fertile land we saw has produced bread in abundance, and in the light of today's reading we could explore that more. But you have heard a number of sermons about bread and food in the last few weeks, and after my holidays I am not left thinking about food so much as about the old stones which we spend our holidays examining. Sicily is full of the archaeological remains of entertainment. There are Roman mosaics of semi-naked people, there are the remains of where people used to congregate and meet each other. There are temples and altars – one altar was so big that it would have been possible to slaughter four hundred sacrificial bulls simultaneously. And there are theatres: lots of Greek and Roman theatres. This is where people told stories, and there is evidence of the great writers of the ancient world – men such as Aeschylus – producing plays in Sicily. In the ancient world they knew how to engage people with words.

We have reached the end of a very long story in Church. If you have been to Church earlier this month, then you may feel that you have been hearing the same reading every week about the Bread of Life. If you have been on your holidays and haven't been here until today, then this is a bit like reading the final chapter of a book before you have read the first chapter. And, like the best dramas, our Bread of Life readings do not end tidily, but rather with a twist in the tale. The twist being that, after a long, long section of teaching – about

five weeks' worth, as we have read it in Church – the reaction of the disciples is to say, “This teaching is difficult; who can accept it?” and some of them walk away and leave Jesus. Like a Greek drama, we have the story, and then we have the story of those hearing the story. In Greek drama, it is often the gods who speak at the start or finish; in Shakespeare we find a prologue or a chorus in plays such as Henry V or Romeo and Juliet. We are invited not just to focus on the story itself, but also explicitly on the reaction of those who hear the story.

There is no doubt that Jesus asks a lot of his followers. The Gospels are full of challenge, and they are also full of verbal games. And the reaction of some of those around Jesus was one of revulsion: they could not take the images which Jesus was throwing at them.

Interestingly, John Calvin, writing in 1553, thought that the lesson of this passage was for the preacher, that he should have the courage to cause offence in his preaching – though not intentionally. And what shocked them? What is so difficult in this passage? Quite simply it is that Jesus was not asking them to react to a story, but to something which was real, in the flesh, and tangible. “This is the bread that came down from heaven... The one who eats this bread will live for ever.” In the end, the tourists like viewing Roman theatres in Sicily, but the Romans didn't think of Sicily as a place of entertainment, but as a place of food. This was what made the island real and useful.

What is real and useful is therefore at the heart of this passage, and the readings we have been hearing for the last month. Words and stories illustrate our faith, but they are not faith itself. Teaching and guidance on how to live a Christian life are not the living of life itself. After so many weeks of really rather repetitive monologue, the dénouement is stepping into reality: “Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in

them.”

It is challenging because faith in Jesus, and relationship with Jesus, is not something we talk about, but something we do. So, let's make this real, and let me give you a conundrum. We are used to homeless people in our Gardens and around the Church: on the whole I think that we are comfortable with their presence and whilst we deplore the failings of our communities which allow people to fall into this situation, most of us (I hope) do not see the individuals who are sleeping behind trees out there as lesser people, as individuals who are less worthy than those who walk past them every morning on their way to work. In the morning we call the Whitechapel Centre who send their team around and usually the people disappear. Although on Sunday mornings we are quite happy to take a cup of tea to any rough sleepers, the Whitechapel Centre act as our conscience on the whole: they do the practical stuff and absolve us from doing anything difficult. So here's the conundrum: we've had rough sleepers around for the last fortnight who are refusing to move on. They make other people feel uncomfortable; they want to leave large quantities of very smelly possessions both inside and outside the building; they want to use our facilities. So far it doesn't sound like a conundrum, but the difficult bit is twofold: firstly, how we *also* minister to other users of the building who are alienated by our visitors; secondly, and more importantly, are we in fact colluding with our guests by not forcing a confrontation with the issues which are keeping them on the streets?

There is a greater sense today that homeless shelters are, in effect, sticking plasters. The approach from the advisors to the City Region Mayor at the moment is that in order to tackle homelessness we need to be looking at the root causes. What causes people to be alienated from their communities to such an extent that they have no roof over their heads?

This is our institutional issue, but it is the same for each of us as individuals: as we pass the homeless, is our rationalization that any money we might give them might be misspent on drugs or alcohol in fact a handy excuse not to open our wallets. Do we too readily create a soothing justification for our lack of engagement?

This, though, is encountering the living bread. We become not just the hearers of the story, like the disciples who walked away from Jesus, but also the story itself, like the disciples who stayed with him. Like Sicily, we need a theatre for hearing stories, but the reality of living is the enduring matter of significance. Food fed the Romans, and it is food which we seek in Jesus, the Bread of Life.

So, if we take our conundrum about our engagement with the homeless, it is not a mere intellectual problem, but something more basic. It is about whether we are onlooker – as in a play – or participant. Jesus didn't want us just to hear stories, but to be the players. But he didn't give us the script. And in the issue of the homelessness outside our door there are no right answers when meeting a need can perpetuate the problem, but disregarding the need can perpetuate suffering. Ignoring the need, though, is *our* problem.

And that is what the Bread of Life is about. It is about ingesting our relationship with Jesus. We are not on-lookers but participants. This is not a play, but reality. And this is not an intellectual conundrum, but a startling challenge, because the moment you walk out there on to the streets of Liverpool, you are going to encounter the homeless, and you have got to deal with your own guilt, reason, indignation, horror, and your own wallet. And that's why the disciples in today's Gospel reading walked away, because they couldn't face all of that. Being a follower of Jesus Christ means not walking away. It doesn't supply the answer

always, but it does mean that we have to face the question and the problem and our own feelings. Following Jesus is about confronting the world, not hiding from it.

Fr Crispin Pailing