

Sunday 28 July 2024
Ninth Sunday after Trinity

Liverpool Parish Church

OT: 2 Kings 4: 42-endts 2:1-21
NT: Ephesians 3: 14-end
Gp: John 6: 1-21

If you are signed up to the Diocese of Liverpool bulletin, you will have received yesterday's bulletin which contains an invitation from Bishop John to join him this summer in his summer reading challenge. This year that challenge is to read the whole bible!

Your first response to that challenge might be to consider it too daunting to attempt, for me it was the second time in a matter of 48 hours that someone had asked me that question; had I read the whole bible? So perhaps that is a sign. +John says, 'the invitation is to read the Bible as a story without being stuck with textual and theological details.'

Those of you who have heard me preach will know that I enjoy reading stories, but not just any stories. I particularly enjoy detective stories of the genre Scandi Noir. I have a collection of the differing styles within the genre, all of them dark tales of broken, complex people. I would recommend one such author Camill Läckberg, who uses a technique that moves between a historical narrative to a present-day situation using past events to reference the current narrative. Filling the pages with clues that point to the central truths of the narrative.

Bishop John's challenge to us this summer is to read the Bible in the same way as the story of God and his relationship with mankind. This morning's lectionary gives just such an opportunity to see that through the interplay of our Old Testament and Gospel readings.

Today marks a change in the flow of the Gospel readings. For eight consecutive weeks the lectionary has followed the narrative of Mark (chapters 2 through to 6) and we will return later in the year to pick up with Mark 7. Meanwhile, during the five-week hiatus in the Markan sequence, we are directed to the sixth chapter of John, a rather critical section that relates the feeding of the five thousand, Jesus walking on water to the disciples, the discourse on Jesus as the bread from heaven, and the mixed response of the disciples to Jesus' difficult teaching. Shifting Gospels means shifting from one literary world to another, from one narrative with its assumptions, purposes, and strategies, to another with a different set of assumptions, purposes, and strategies.

The readings for this Sunday encompasses both the feeding of the multitude (6:1-15) and the strange event of Jesus' coming to the disciples on the sea (vs. 16-21). Two motifs run through John's story of the feeding, especially when compared with the stories in the other three gospels. First at the beginning of the story, what seems critical is not Jesus' compassion for the hungry and 'shepherdless' crowds as in each of the other three Gospels, but the lesson taught to the disciples about not underestimating the power of Jesus.

Jesus puts the question to Philip of how the crowds are to be fed, in order "to test him, for he himself knew what he was going to do". Thinking logically, Philip responds with a plausible retort: "Six months' wages won't pay for the food needed to feed these people." Andrew jumps into the conversation by reporting the presence of one boy's lunch, but adds, "What is that among so many people?" Interestingly, Jesus does not rebuke Philip and Andrew for their realistic assessments, but he takes charge of the situation, gives instructions to the disciples, distributes the loaves and fish

himself, and then has the disciples gather the remains. The answer to their closed appraisals is a demonstration of divine power that blows realism into a cocked hat. The point is that cautious calculations that operate only on the basis of possibility, calculations otherwise revered in our world, ignore "the one who comes from above", the One who redefines what is possible.

A second motif has to do with the superficial response of the crowds. They follow Jesus because of the marvellous "signs" he does. The readers of the narrative already know from other Passover incidents that Jesus is suspicious of those who are captivated only by the miracles he performs. On the one hand, the crowd declares that he is the promised prophet (6:14), but on the other hand, having been miraculously fed, they want to make him king (6:15).

The mind of the crowd is utilitarian. What can we get out of the miracle worker? A perpetual free lunch? Does it sound familiar? "What's in it for me?" It is the kind of thinking that skews the reality of grace and seeks to make of Jesus a genie or an errand boy to satisfy our human wants. It reverses the answer to the catechism question so that it would read: "Our chief end is to be glorified by God forever." From such thinking Jesus retreats— then and now.

The story of Jesus walking on the water is a theophany, a visible display to human beings that expresses the presence and character of God, set over against the crowd's superficial response to Jesus. The setting is significant rough seas, heavy winds, weary rowers, and the telling statement, "It was now dark, and Jesus had not yet come to them". Jesus' withdrawal has left the disciples bereft of their leader, confused, and fearful. "Darkness" in John's gospel is not only an indication of the time of day but often also a vivid symbol for the circumstances of the characters. In the moment of deep perplexity, Jesus appears on the water, creating even greater fear in the disciples "It is I" a disclosure identifying Jesus as the one whom the disciples were expecting to join them but at the same time associating him with the One whose name is "I am".

John is pointing to Jesus as more than the promised prophet, certainly more than a miracle-worker who allows himself to be captured by the crowd to supply their wishes. No, John echoes Isaiah where the Lord is described as the one who dried up the waters at the time of the exodus from Egypt the one who is identified as the "I am".

In the coming weeks, our lectionary series will bring us deeper into John's revelation of the true nature of Christ and I would urge you, if you can follow this journey with us. Trusting in God's kingship can be challenging at times. This becomes even more difficult when the tasks ahead of us seem unfeasible. This seems to be the reality of the servant in the reading from 2 Kings. He is looking at twenty loaves of barley bread and a few heads of grain and trying to make sense of the task of feeding a hundred men.

Sometimes we can look at the task ahead of us and think it is not possible. This servant doesn't want to look stupid or face the wrath of a hundred hungry men or the annoyance of their master, by serving up a less than glorious feast. But then we see Elisha's reply. He isn't focused on the implausibility of the task. Rather, he is focused on the command of God. God has said they'll eat and have leftovers, and this is what happens when it is shared with them! In the same way the passage from Ephesians highlights the difference between what the world sees as being qualified for the job and what God sees. For me, this passage highlights similar differences when it comes to the disciples and the feeding of the 5000. The most effective leader is not necessarily the one who is most qualified on paper, the one expected to step up due to experience, but rather the one with the essential qualities, the one who steps out in faith, the one who expects God to act and doesn't

rely on their own expectations. We are often asked to tread this difficult tightrope of what seems impossible and what God has called us to. And in those moments, we don't need the mind of the unnamed servant, but of Elisha. "God told us to do it, so we do it." The world would see the young boy as the least of them, yet he was one Jesus chose.

Age or experience is no barrier to Christ's lesson for us all to offer what we have and see what Jesus will do, in glorious abundance.

Fr Bill Addy