

Sunday 25 August 2024
The Thirteenth Sunday After Trinity

Liverpool Parish Church

OT: Joshua 24:1-2a, 14-18

NT: Ephesians 6:10-20

Gp: John 6:56-69

In trying to make my weekly shopping trip more exciting, I go to Tesco bakery and buy tiger cobs for us. They are delicious! However, you have to eat them on the same day that you buy them, as they are simply not as good the next day. Not so with the bread of life that Jesus talks about in today's Gospel reading. That remains fresh all of the time. We've heard a lot about the bread of life over the last few weeks that has been excellently preached by the other priests here at Liverpool Parish Church. We will hear about this again today, but I felt a dip into Ephesians would be helpful.

The scene is a dramatic one. The military leader stands before the assembled troops and delivers a rousing speech in anticipation of a coming battle. The troops are reminded of their heritage, promised honour as a result of their bravery, and assured that their valour, not their numbers, will prevail against the might of the enemies. Whether it be from Shakespeare's *Henry V* or films such as *Braveheart*, the battlefield speech is designed to prepare, to fortify, and motivate the troops to face the battle ahead of them with determination, courage, and perseverance.

This part of Paul's letter to the Ephesians acts as a rousing conclusion to the entire letter in which Christians are being called to arms for the battle in which we must stand strong against all spiritual forces of evil. Earlier in Paul's letter, we were informed of God's great power winning a cosmic victory over every **rule, authority, power, and dominion** through the resurrection of Jesus Christ. This amazing triumph includes God putting everything under the care of Christ, and we the church share in this victory because we are the body of Christ.

But in the gospel reading you will also notice that Jesus says that the teaching about dwelling in Christ is difficult. Even the disciples struggled to understand. What Paul is reminding us of is that although Jesus won the main spiritual battle with the devil when he died on the cross and then was resurrected, the spiritual forces of evil have not gone away gently into the night.

When we grow closer to God and our faith is strengthened, we can feel that we face setbacks and knocks. The Ephesians reading we heard this morning stands as a call to arms in order that we as Christians are properly prepared for such setbacks. We see the evil of this world in the news every day. Yes, there are terrible wars and inhumanities happening

around us. Human beings doing evil things to one another and to our world. It is our job to stand firm against such discrimination and terror.

Paul's writing is very dramatic. His use of language describing armour, are possibly drawn more directly from the book of Isaiah which refers to belt (11:5), breastplate (59:17), footwear (52:7), helmet (59:17), and sword (49:2). Remember originally, Paul was a devout Jew and would have known the Torah texts very well including the book of Isaiah which talks throughout about freedom.

It is quite true that the fiery, military, tone of this text can be rather off-putting to many of us today. We sit in a church this morning surrounded by a country that appears safe from war. Not so for many countries. There are many war torn countries throughout the world. In my job I support many young girls and boys who've fled their war torn countries to receive sanctuary and safety here in Liverpool.

So, we do need to put on the armour of Christ, to stand up to and challenge the evil in this world. As well the armour- prayer is a major resource to build up our resistance. When we pray, the Holy Spirit is there to guide and support us. Our persistence in prayer is a hallmark of trusting in God's care and relying not on our own abilities but remaining open to the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Praying together as we do in our Eucharist service reminds us that we are part of a community who grow together in love. We are in this together... We come to church to worship, to share the sacrament of the Eucharist and to pray to God, but we do this in unity as the body of Christ.

This links us back to the Gospel of John. John has been teaching us for several weeks now about how we are linked to Jesus and to God. It is critical that we understand why we receive the Eucharist together. It ties us together as one, within the Eucharist there is unity.

I am sure you have all heard about the fight, flight or freeze response, where, when we are faced with an awful situation we either fight, run, or freeze up. People often don't know which of these they would do until it happens, and if you are anything like me, you might have any of these reactions depending on the situation or how you are doing that day.

Now, if we think about difficult situations, and so I am *not* talking here about a sudden, major traumatic event, but rather, something better labelled as 'difficult'. Such as too many hard days at work, a friend who keeps letting you down, a partner who keepings winding you up, a project or voluntary role not going the way you hoped or taking much longer than planned, or your children screaming all evening. How many of us, if we are honest, during those times, have on occasion had the 'flight' thought? So have considered walking away, or probably more accurately, driving away, where to? I doubt many of us have gotten that far in our thought process, but, in the moment when things are very difficult for too long, we might consider walking away from that person, situation or place, and starting again. And

though sometimes we might follow through with this, more often than not, we find a way to cope, maybe we go on a walk, call a friend, or just go to bed, I know I like to go for a run. And what do we do the next day? We carry on, try again, seek to make things better. We *don't* often, unless it is something horrific or incredibly difficult, follow through with 'flight' in these situations.

However, sadly, when it comes to church, people sometimes do. We hear about people who have a faith, have been committed to a church community, yet have left after one disagreement with someone, an ill-judged comment from another, or they didn't agree with the Bible passage, sermon or teaching they heard. And just like that, after years of commitment, because their faith journey has gotten difficult, they walk away.

Today's Gospel reading *was* a difficult teaching. It's about Jesus being the bread of life, *and* about living through Jesus. It was difficult for those who heard it and many *did* struggle to accept it, including the disciples who questioned together if they could accept it. This was more than an upset with Jesus, this was about the teaching itself.

It makes me wonder, when *was* the last time we were challenged in *our* faith? Do we *even* allow Jesus' teachings, God, to challenge us? *Or* are we here to be affirmed, to find something we already agree with, and if we disagree we get off, I hope not.

Today's reading reminds us that we *are all* challenged in our faith at times, and it leads us to consider how we respond in our faith at the times that we find God's teaching difficult; the times we are challenged and taken out of our comfort zones. But, if we do take our faith seriously, then it can be uncomfortable. When we are encouraged to trust God when around us we see suffering, to forgive those who hurt us, to love those who dislike us, and so on. It *isn't* always easy. There *are* difficult teachings. Yet, the answer is *not* to walk away or to stop accepting God in our lives.

Our Gospel reading, which many found hard at the time, is about Jesus wanting them, and us, to partake in His life, to participate, to share, to join, *our* life, with His. If we are to 'eat this bread', as Jesus says in the Gospel passage, then we are encouraged to do something, not to be passive, but to get up and eat, to live, to open our hearts to God, so that we can share with God.

So, when we are challenged with our faith, when we struggle or doubt or find things difficult, we are encouraged to stay, to keep our hearts open to God, to participate *with* God, to be active, not walking away, but to lean on God and learn from God, allowing God to feed us spiritually. Yes, to question, reflect, pray, read, discuss; but, to ultimately rely on God. As Simon Peter says at the end of this Gospel passage, well, 'Where would we go?', Because Jesus *is* the one who gives a true and full life.

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