

Sunday 2 August 2026

Liverpool Parish Church

The Ninth Sunday after Trinity

OT: Isaiah 55:1-5

NT: Romans 9:1-5

Gp: Matthew 14:13-21

When I was a curate, in Prescott, with its very old parish church, 20 years ago, I got talking one day with a very old lady, who described how as a child, when being taught stories from the Bible, she always imagined them happening in Prescott. I particularly remember her describing how she had envisioned the story of the call of Samuel, the boy who heard the voice of God at night in the Temple, as his master, the priest Eli, slept. She laughed as she described how she had imagined the priest to be someone like the Vicar, and as a small girl who only ventured up to the altar, through the ranks of the all-male parish church choir, on a Sunday, with her parents, for a blessing, it seemed to make sense to her that Samuel was something like a chorister, wearing a cassock, surplice, and a ruff, when God spoke to him. She laughed at herself, but her way of imagining the stories of ancient Israel being played out in a small industrial town in Lancashire, was not eccentric, or naïve, but actually deeply traditional, and one to emulate. Last week Fr Stephen spoke about Jesus' parables, and the way in which we can see that the disciples, later, began to try to explain away some of their strangeness. If religion is born out of the human yearning to know God, its dark side is always the desire to pin God down, like a specimen to be observed from a safe and detached distance. My old parishioner's childhood habit, which I secretly knew she had persisted with, was to imagine herself a character in the ongoing story of salvation, rather than someone who read about something interesting that happened long, long ago.

At the moment the new film version of *The Odyssey* is attracting quite a bit of attention, not least among people who have never encountered the Greek myths before. People in earlier generations had greater familiarity with these old, old stories, and so they came to inspire art and literature that played around with those stories held in common. Today there are fewer shared stories, or songs, binding people together. By the by, it has been argued, convincingly, I think, that one of the reasons why many younger people became so exercised by J. K. Rowling's views on gender, when they disagreed with her, was because the Harry Potter books were their generation's stories in common, their myths, rather than, the old Greek myths, or more to the point, the stories of the Bible.

For Christ, his disciples, and St Paul, in our second reading today, however, the stories of the people of Israel, already centuries old, were stories they knew very well, and inhabited. For hundreds of years the Jewish people had heard the stories of Moses and David, and all the rest, time and again. They had been asking themselves, who God was, and they looked for God to act in their generation as he had in the past – the story of salvation was ongoing, and like many a Hollywood blockbuster today, they expected the plot to be a rehash of an earlier release, because God was dependable. They weren't looking for God to mess around with, or rewrite the story of salvation, they were looking for God to be steadfast and sure, and to

share with them the same intimate relationship, heart to heart, as David had done, and they savoured that relationship every time they sang or prayed the psalms attributed to the shepherd boy turned King.

Which brings us to the feeding of the 5000. Just as my old parishioner imagined Samuel as a boy employed in the worship of the parish church she knew so well, so in the Gospels the greatest hits of Israel's history are being lived out again, not in the dramatic setting of the Red Sea, and the desert, where the thousands of liberated slaves were fed by food sent miraculously by God, as Moses taught them, having climbed Mount Sinai with its thunderbolts, and stone tablets engraved by God's own hand. The story in Exodus is the full Technicolor, or maybe I should say, IMAX, cinematic experience. The gospels, however, play out a strange reenactment of the drama in what seems like a deliberately more domesticated, provincial way. The oppressive character of Pharaoh is replaced by the pathetic Herod, a puppet king, propped up by the Romans. He has just killed John the Baptist in the verses before today's gospel begins, and that's the context for Jesus wanting to go into a quiet deserted place, to mourn, and pray. But this is Galilee, not the desert, and when the people follow Jesus, it's not through the parted waters of the Red Sea, pursued by chariots, no its more homely, they come in their fishing boats, and when the disciples worry about feeding them, there's no prospect of them starving, as there was in Exodus, in a barren desert far from human settlement, no, the disciples sensibly say, 'send them home, because they're getting hungry'. In Exodus the food the people eat is manna, a miraculous substance that appears on the ground overnight, and quails, that arrive in unexpected abundance, but in the gospel account of this miraculous meal, it all begins with a boy's packed lunch, of bread and fish, the everyday food of the people of that part of the world.

St Paul gets to the heart of it – in his letter to the Romans, he laments that many of his people, the Jews, don't recognise Jesus as the Saviour who somehow encapsulates the history of Israel, and by extension all humanity, in our wrestling with God, because, remember, that's what the name Israel means, 'he who strives with God'. But for us who do, and inherit that rich, deep history of striving, and being saved, let's ask God to help us to see ourselves, our lives, our city, our questions, hunger, hearts, as the stage on which the steadfast, sure, story of God is being played out today, in his abundant compassion.

Fr Philip Anderson