

Proper13 Year B 2021

In the prophecy of Isaiah we read (Ch 6) 'In the year that king Uzziah died I saw the Lord, high and lifted up, and his train filled the temple'. That is surely how God should be, for most of us, anyway - 'high and lifted up'; way beyond anything we can imagine - not a grubby Jewish carpenter walking dusty roads with the rag, tag and bobtail of society following in his wake. No wonder 'the Jews' are offended when he says 'I have come down from heaven'. God is in heaven AND THAT IS WHERE HE IS SUPPOSED TO STAY. 'Is this not Jesus, the son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know?' they ask.

We often want God to be a spiritual experience, not incarnate, not fleshy, not messy, in the muck and mire of everyday life. That is too uncomfortable, too immediate, too challenging. He says 'Here I am, right in front of you, the Word made flesh - feed on me'. Now that is a challenge.

Today's readings are all about journeying. Elijah, the church in Ephesus, the crowd in Capernaum, those of us gathered here today, all on a journey - or not on the journey, as the case may be.

Elijah is on a terrifying journey. Having defeated the prophets of Baal in a contest between God and their pagan beliefs, his life is threatened by Queen Jezebel, and he has had to flee. He - or rather, God - has won the battle against Baal but the cost to Elijah has been great. It is almost as if he is suffering from what today we would call Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. Victors can suffer that stress just as much as the defeated. He flees and asks God to let him die. At least he still recognises that his life is in God's hands. And in this desperate journey into the wilderness of despair and depression, God walks with him - in the form of an angel, an angel who will bring him bread and water, sustenance, energy, nourishment for the next step on a long journey to recovery and renewal. Elijah's worth is not in his actions against the prophets of Baal; his worth is in God's love for him and God's call upon his life and faithfulness.

It is the call of God upon the lives of the Christian community of Ephesus that Paul describes in today's Epistle reading. They too are on a journey from pagan cultic worship or from orthodox Jewish devotion to the Law, towards the God of mercy and love whom Paul had encountered on the road to Damascus.

How are they to navigate the transition from their former lives to life 'in Christ'? On first reading, today's passage looks like a list of rules and regulations for this new life. It begins 'putting away all falsehood, let us all speak the truth to our neighbours, for we are members of one another'. You wouldn't lie to each other, would you? Really? Actually, expect that the person you lie to the most is - yourself! It is usually called 'self-justification.' 'It didn't really matter'; 'He deserved it'; 'I didn't intend . . .' whatever it was, perhaps he didn't deserve it, it did matter and you jolly well did intend! Come on, confess, we have all been there, including me.

Paul goes on to list, like a new version of the ten commandments, all the things which are prohibited on this journey into the new life 'in Christ', before he sets out the sort of behaviour the new Christians are to embrace - be kind, tender hearted, forgiving, imitators of God. Live in love. It used to be said that 'See these Christians, how they love one another!', until that saying became a taunt of derision as we went for each other's throats over matters of doctrine, liturgy, church structure, etc..

Those days are mainly over now, although there are some issues

we still refuse to disagree on in love, but we are still a long way off being imitators of God, living in love - still on a journey, like the Christians in Ephesus, with a long way to go. On the stage of the global village and on the front line of our everyday relationships, we are called, by our baptism, to imitate Christ in our own behaviour, to forgive as we have been forgiven, to grow into the likeness of Christ, to allow God to use us as instruments of peace, justice, mercy and nurturers of his creation. This journey we are on is an on-going encounter with the living, loving God in Christ Jesus - now, is that exciting or is it terrifying?

Or is it simply unimaginable, as it was to those from Capernaum - the insiders, the proper people - (not the motley crowd following Jesus) - those who could not accept Jesus 'the son of Joseph', those who could not even begin an internal debate about him, because they 'know' him. How can he possibly have come down from heaven, when we know who he is, who his family is? And, to be honest, that seems a very logical argument. When I told one member of my family that I was to be ordained she laughed in my face - You! You! - and I said 'Yes, me. I thought the same. Just shows what a sense of humour God has!'

But Jesus persists - 'I am the bread of life. I am the living bread that has come down from heaven'.

Just as Jesus is on a journey to Jerusalem, to his passion, we are on a journey of faith. Every day we are asked, drawn by God, to set out in the company of Jesus. In calling us to follow him in faith, he supplies us with the requirements for that journey, as Elijah was supplied for his journey through the wilderness, and what Jesus gives us will feed us not only for today and tomorrow but for all eternity. How generous is that?

When we gather together we are fed by his word when the Scriptures are read - food you can taste every day - the Scriptures are not rationed. Scripture can enter into our hearts and transform us, give us strength and encouragement, comfort us, and transform us, challenge us. Psalm 23 verse 1 when we feel overwhelmed by the day's problems; Psalm 24 verse 1 when we think about our imminent climate catastrophe.

And then of course we are nourished by the Eucharist, as we gather together to share in the body of Christ - supplying our need, supporting us, nourishing us on our journey to him, with him. This is a gift freely given, not because we are particularly holy or worthy, not because we deserve it but because God loves us and

offers himself to us in Word and Sacrament. This - Word and Sacrament - does not give us false joy or hope - it is not a quick fix for whatever oppresses us or depresses us or makes us angry. We can however 'taste and see that the Lord is good', So, as we go out from here, let us be confident in the Lord's presence and ask for the grace to walk with Him on our journey to Him.