



**Sermon preached by Revd Nigel Uden on 25<sup>th</sup> August 2024**

**Readings:** 1 Kings 8:1, 6, 10-13, 22-30, 41-43; Ephesians 6:10-17; John 6:56-69

**Trinity X111**

*As the service began, Nigel Uden lifted a plaited loaf from a plate on the table, and offered these Opening Words.*

Based upon John 6:56-69 *The bread of eternal life*, inspired by the writings of Richard Rohr <sup>1</sup>



Grace to you, and peace, from God our Father, and the Lord Jesus Christ. <sup>2</sup>

Always one for images and pictures, Jesus said,

‘I am the bread of life; the one who eats this bread will live forever.’

For lives of such opportunity and challenge, of such choice and of so much chance, in a world of such complexity, disagreement and obsession, a world of such starvation, we are offered God as we see God in Jesus, a person like us, as ordinary as bread.

When Jesus says he is the bread of eternal life, he does not say, ‘Think about this’; he does not say, ‘fight about this’; he does not say ‘stare at this.’ He says, ‘Eat this; take me to yourself.’

A wise person <sup>3</sup> once said, ‘There are so many hungry people in the world that God could only come into the world in the form of food. Not just in the form of sermons or Bibles, but in food.’

And another <sup>4</sup> said, ‘Christ is the bread, awaiting our hunger.’

Just as when our bodies are hungry, we make room inside us for food, so when we are spiritually hungry, we are invited to make room for another presence.

If we are filled with our own opinions, ideas, and sense that we’re complete we are a world unto ourselves; we do not make room for ‘another’. But in our hunger and helplessness we, this morning have come to this place, because we’ve come to Jesus, trusting, that the one who eats this bread will live forever. <sup>5</sup>

In our first hymn we open ourselves to the presence of God in Christ, asking that we might receive what we ask for, and retain what we receive. It is *Christ is made the sure foundation*.

*The Sermon then followed the readings from Ephesians and Kings.*

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<sup>1</sup> Inspired by the writings of Richard Rohr (1943-): JESUS: on the bread of life. Available at <https://thevalueofsparrows.wordpress.com/2015/05/04/jesus-on-the-bread-of-life-by-richard-rohr/>; accessed 22<sup>nd</sup> August 2024

<sup>2</sup> I Corinthians 1.3

<sup>3</sup> Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi 1869-1948

<sup>4</sup> Possibly St Augustine of Hippo 354-438 CE

<sup>5</sup> John 6.58

## Sermon

Now, may the words of my mouth and the thoughts of all our hearts,  
in all their honesty and adventurousness be acceptable to you,  
O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

Images tumble from this morning's readings: bread, buildings, and armour, to name but the three of the most obvious. Day after day this week, I have wondered what we were meant to hear from them. In truth, I began thinking it would be King Solomon at the dedication of the temple, but ended up thinking it had to be about all three.

Millennia separate us from King Solomon, and we could launch a significant examination of exactly what he said, when it was written down, and what the authors' purpose might have been in creating it. After all, as we heard it you can tell that can seem not only like a sequence of not entirely well connected ideas, but even of some that contradict each other. So, we could do that exercise but little of that will equip us for being people of faith in the contemporary world. Rather, the preacher's task is to be a window through which the first book of the Kings might be an instrument of the Holy Spirit speaking into our day and age, in our building and as we go from it.

In a passage full of contradictions, we seem to be being told that whilst a magnificent temple – an 'exalted house' - has been built for the glory of God no such place can hold or contain or confine God. God is out and about; God is everywhere. Moreover, we're led to believe God is not simply where the world is majestic and beautiful. God is in the fog – what our translation calls 'thick darkness', and could also mean 'dense, heavy cloud'. That's where God is, says Solomon in his prayer. 'Twas ever thus. God began in the 'darkness that covered the face of the deep',<sup>6</sup> and that's where God remains, when delivering the Ten Commandments to Moses God's in the clouds at the top of Jebel Musa,<sup>7</sup> when watching death embrace Jesus on the cross it is as darkness falls.<sup>8</sup> God never asked for a temple of cedar and bling, never wanted to be set apart and aloof. In this understanding God has always been in the fog. Is that not why we can endure the foggy times of our lives, because God hasn't hived off into a place of privileged luxury, but has remained in the shadows with us? So it is that the cradle and the cross of Jesus are such profound expressions of God's nature and *modus operandi*. A malodorous manger, and a malefactor's scars are the authentic truth about the fog-bound God. It's how God can dissipate the fog – not by avoiding it, but by being with us in it.

Of course, Sunday by Sunday we come into this place of light and air to think about God - and please God that its ambience assists us in that quest – but is the truth not that we are as likely to encounter God in a war zone, a field ravaged by too much or too little rain, or in a home where love is absent, because such fog is where God's at.

Nor should we naively assume the believer's role is always to think they have to remove the shadows; often, if in our discipleship we really are like God as God is in Jesus, our place, too, is faithfully to be in the shadows. Moreover, while we're there we may have nothing more glamorous to offer than bread. We cannot always be the answer to people's difficulties, but we can be their companion – we can 'com panis', break bread with them - as they endure them. But might not that be the whole reason that bread works as an image of what God is offering? It's the breathtaking fulness of God – grace and truth in superabundance – in an ever so ordinary loaf held out to us in the fog.

I sense this is an important word for us as we wonder what God has for us in the vicissitudes of our own lives. And as we seek to embody good pastoral care to one another. And as we aspire to Christ-like mission in the community. Yes, of course it's awesome when we are caught up in the dispersing of shadows by an inextinguishable light, such as a successful campaign to house people who are homeless, or funding research into a wonderful remedy for a previously incurable illness, but those successes that cannot be the only measure of authentic Christian life or ministry or mission.

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<sup>6</sup> Genesis 1.2

<sup>7</sup> Exodus 20.18

<sup>8</sup> Luke 23.44

Some of life's shadows are the way it's going to be: depression is real, disease is not eradicated, bereavement is inevitable, nations go to war, the environment evolves in difficult ways, human nature is not undiluted virtue. Surely that's why we are offered the armour of God - because stuff happens we need faith and righteousness, truth and peace to protect, to shelter, to inspire us in the midst of them? And the sooner we grasp that, rather than trying to pretend that it doesn't have to be that way, the more strength we will gain to be to one another, and to the world, fruitful expressions of the reliably-resurrected love of God that we so justifiably celebrate at Easter – that love which, when even faith and hope slip through our fingers, is the love that is stronger than death and can play a crucial part in dispersing the shadows.

You see, if what we believe is that the only evidence of God being good is when nothing goes wrong, or at least, when things inexorably get better, then it is little wonder that God loses credibility and appeal. People – be they sceptics or believers – can see that isn't the way things are; everyone knows that that 'stuff happens' and we only fool ourselves if we pretend it doesn't, hiding behind a pious mask of 'all will be well' religion. The shiny, saccharine, naive promise of a world where nothing is amiss is not where God began, nor is it where God continues. God's promise is not always to disperse the fog, but is always to be *with us* in the fog. If only we allowed the folk religion that so dominates contemporary Britain, the folk religion that so leads people to reject religion altogether, to buy the theology of the hymn that rolls around the terraces at the Cup Final:

Abide with me; fast falls the eventide;  
the darkness deepens; Lord with me abide.  
When other helpers fail and comforts flee,  
help of the helpless, O abide with me.

Swift to its close ebbs out life's little day;  
earth's joys grow dim; its glories pass away;  
change and decay in all around I see;  
O thou who changest not, abide with me.

I need thy presence every passing hour.  
What but thy grace can foil the tempter's power?  
Who, like thyself, my guide and stay can be?  
Through cloud and sunshine, Lord, abide with me.

I fear no foe, with thee at hand to bless;  
ills have no weight, and tears no bitterness.  
Where is death's sting? Where, grave, thy victory?  
I triumph still, if thou abide with me.

Hold thou thy cross before my closing eyes;  
shine through the gloom and point me to the skies.  
heaven's morning breaks, and earth's vain shadows flee;  
in life, in death, O Lord, abide with me.<sup>9</sup>

As a commentator has it,

*One response to the persistent existential questions, to the perpetual fears and hopes, may find its most permanent and proper expression in a whisper that is half hope and half dread: 'In life, in death, O Lord, abide with me!'*<sup>10</sup>

Going from the sanctuary of this place into the fog of life, may the inextinguishable light of God's love spur us on, and shine through us, until in God's way and in God's time all things are brought to completion, and all shall be well.

N. P. Uden  
25<sup>th</sup> August 2024

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<sup>9</sup> Henry Francis Lyte 1793-1847 RS 336

<sup>10</sup> Watson, J. R. 1997 *The English Hymn: a critical and historical study* Oxford: Clarendon Press, page 354