



Sermon preached by Dr Janet Bottoms on 11th August 2024

Readings: John 6:35, 41-51; Psalm 78:1- 4, 13-25; Ephesians 4: 25- 32; 5: 1- 2

“Our hunger cries from plenty, Lord.”

Hunger can cry from extreme poverty, too, but that is something we understand – and can relieve if we have, or are given, the means. We are often less willing to examine other kinds of hunger, whether it be for love, or power, or status; for what seems like a vanished, better “past”; or simply to be seen – to be known for who we are. It is a hunger for something we feel we are missing out on, or being cheated of - *“bread that does not turn to stone; truth unreached; love unknown.”*

We may react with anger – or with a sense of bewilderment. The word comes from the old English “*wilder*”, meaning to stray or be led astray - to wander - the word from which we get “wilderness”. Alternatively we may be weighed down by sense of loss - of betrayal or alienation – a desert – a dryness such as the poet William Cowper wrote of:

*Where is the blessedness I knew when first I saw the Lord?
Where is the soul-refreshing dew -
What peaceful hours I once enjoyed; how sweet their memory still,
But they have left an aching void the world can never fill.”*

Hunger can be physical or metaphorical - material, psychological, emotional, spiritual – but it is at the heart of the great story of the Exodus from Egypt; of a people on a journey in search of freedom and hope - a “*promised land flowing with milk and honey*” - and of the wilderness in which they found themselves. That story may be of a historical event; part of a nation’s epic, but it was also a spiritual one. It is a story that continued to resonate through their scriptures.

It was God, they believed, who had summoned them; led them out of slavery and through the Red Sea; and gone before them, visible by day as a cloud, by night as fire. Yet they did not trust him. Psalm 78 puts it, “*they tested God in their heart by demanding the food they craved; “they rebelled against him”*”. This runs as a continuous thread through the Old Testament.

We hear it in *Exodus* chapter 16: “*if only we had died by the hand of the Lord ...in Egypt, when we sat by the fleshpots and ate our fill of bread ...*” they complain. They turn in anger on Moses who, in turn, complains to God about them, and God sends them manna from heaven - “*mortals ate the bread of heaven*”, but they are suspicious. “*What is it?*” they demand. (It has been suggested that that is a possible meaning of the word “*manna*”).

In the book of *Numbers*, chapters 10 & 11, they are complaining again. “*We remember the fish we used to eat in Egypt for nothing; - the cucumbers, the melons, the leeks, the onions, the garlic; but now our strength is dried up and there is nothing at all but this manna to look at*”. How dull. How unappealing. It has to be acknowledged that Israel’s writers and prophets really piled on the weight of accusation against their people in their national epic.

Then there is *bread* – a staple food, “*bread of life*”, a physical reality but also a spiritual one. Listen to Isaiah’s call: *Ho, everyone who comes to the waters, and you that have no money – Come, buy and eat! . . . without money and without price. Why spend money on what is not bread, and your labour on what does not satisfy? Listen carefully to me, and eat what is good, and your soul will delight. Incline your ear, and come to me: listen, so that you may live.* It is against this scriptural background of wilderness and hunger and food that we need to understand the words of Jesus – “*I am the bread of life*” and “*I am the bread that came down from heaven.*”

When the children of Israel were drawing near the end of their journey, as we read in *Deuteronomy*, Moses addressed them, reminding them of how God led them through the wilderness in order to “*humble*” them, to test them; of how he let them hunger and then fed them with food that was strange to them, to make them understand that “*man does not live by bread alone, but also by every*

word that comes from the mouth of God” - words that nourish and strengthen and comfort and inspire.

“*Not by bread alone*”. I am sure you recognise the quotation. It is spoken by Jesus in the account of his “temptation” or “testing” in Matthew’s gospel. Immediately after his baptism Jesus was led or driven by the Spirit into the wilderness, where he fasted for forty days and nights and then was hungry. Then “*the tempter came and said to him, If you are the son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread*”, but Jesus answered “*It is written, one does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.*” A wilderness can be a place of regrets, of loss, of desolation and hopelessness, but it can also be a place of discovery or recovery – and of new direction. In the wilderness you can find that you have a sure guide; one such as Jesus found in the scriptures and his disciples found in him.

For the author of John’s gospel, who has meditated long and hard on what he has seen and heard, Jesus is the living bread in the wilderness, the Word of God become flesh, as well as the Light, the guiding fire of a visible presence for those walking in the darkness; and he is all this and more because he has also known the wilderness. He has known hunger, isolation, perhaps doubt, and a questioning about how he is to respond to the calling he feels within himself. It is from this time, we are told, that “*Jesus began to proclaim, Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.*” It is because Jesus has known this hunger that when the people in their emptiness come seeking miraculous food he can say, *I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry.*”

Of course his hearers react with disbelief. They complain that he is, obviously, a man, like themselves; a man whose origins they know well. But Jesus is not worried about their mutterings. No one is forcing them to believe him. When they are ready, when they are hungry enough for truth, they will come. “*No one can come to me unless drawn by the Father who sent me,*” he says, and then he adds, “*It is written in the prophets, ‘And they shall all be taught by God.’ Everyone who has heard and learned from the Father comes to me.*” Jeremiah is the prophet Jesus is referring to here; Jeremiah who wrote that “*the days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah.*” It will not be like the Old Covenant, “*a covenant which they broke,*” and it will not be laws written on stone. Instead, “*I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. No longer shall they teach one another or say to each other, ‘Know the Lord,’ for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the Lord, for I will forgive their iniquity and remember their sin no more.*”

Forgiveness – a fresh start – new guidance written on their hearts - and a close, a personal relationship with the One who cares for them and feeds them with *the bread of life*. It means that if you find the way before you bewildering you will be able to ask, directly, for help and strength and wisdom. “*Ask and it will be given you, Seek and you will find.*” Don’t be afraid. The promise is there for all who believe – and we should remember that that word “*believe*” means trust – put your faith in it and act on that faith. It means going forward in the expectation that you will be supported, led and held; but if, unexpectedly, you should find yourself lost, you can know that you will be sought out and found by Jesus the Good Shepherd, who promises that he has come so that people may “*have life, and have it more abundantly*”. God’s “*eternal life*” in all its fullness.

Most importantly, such a life is not to be in isolation, but in communion with God and with others who have also accepted and are trying to live it in the power of the Spirit. This is the theme of the apostles and evangelists and builders of the early church, and it is what we find in our reading from the letter to the Ephesians.

It is to be outgoing, not a self-centred life; concerned to build one another up as a family, the “*children of God*”. They must also be able to trust each other as well as trusting in God. This was important because these early church communities were very mixed, coming from a variety of backgrounds, a variety of belief systems. - Jews and Gentiles; slaves and free, male and female, rich and poor, and marginalized outcasts of the kind Jesus mixed and ate with despite criticism from the

self-righteous. *“So then,”* writes the author of the letter to the Ephesians, *“putting away falsehood, let all of us speak the truth to our neighbours, for we are members of one another.”*

Anything wrong or negative in their attitudes must be turned to positive by being *“kind to one another, forgiving one another as Christ forgave you.”* Thieves must give up stealing and work honestly instead *“so as to have something to share with the needy.”* They might be angry sometimes, - anger can be natural or even justified – but they must not *“let the sun go down on”* their anger, not go to bed still nursing it. Finally there must be no *“evil talk”* come out of their mouths, – no backbiting, no slander or malicious gossip – but rather *“only what is useful for building up, as there is need, so that your words may give grace to those who hear”* – that is, be a blessing to them.

Altogether it’s a wonderful picture – practical, down-to-earth - of a group of people being guided in how to live with each other, to *“love their neighbour as themselves”* – accepting and supporting and blessing each other.- inspired by the assurance that they need no longer hunger. They are loved by God, will be fed by God’s word, and be able to trust in the promise of life in God, just as children know that they are loved, and fed by and trust in their parents and will grow up copying the way they speak and act. So, the writer concludes *“Be imitators of God, as beloved children, and live in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.”*

Jesus said, *“I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.”* Amen. May he bless this word to our hearts..

And if, one day, we unexpectedly find ourselves back in the wilderness - tempted - tested - bewildered - dry = we can hold onto the knowledge that we will be sought and found again, - led and fed and enabled to go forward in faith and hope, remembering that a wilderness can be a place of new beginnings, of a new and fuller understanding, and a renewed and brighter hope if we wait patiently, humbly and trusting in the love of God shown to us in Jesus.