

Sermon

Sunday 5 August 2018

Lessons

Exodus 16: 2 – 4, 9 – 15

St John 6: 24 – 35

In the heat of the wilderness, exhausted from walking day after day with feet sore and burning, the Israelites complained to Moses and

Aaron:

If only we had died by the hand of the LORD in the land of Egypt, where we sat by the fleshpots and ate our fill of bread; for you have brought us out into this wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger.

It is utterly human to complain in the face of suffering and to do so when there is no hope on the horizon. Misery and hopelessness diminish the human spirit. The people complained that they would starve to death. In our text today we are told that the LORD heard the pleas of the Israelites and promised to 'rain bread from heaven'. Each morning God would provide manna and each evening there would be quails for the people to catch and eat. Described in Scripture as 'a fine, flaky substance, fine as frost', Moses told the people that this is the bread that the LORD had given them to eat. At the centre of the narrative, there is a moment when the people drew near to God and, looking into the far distance, into the wilderness, they saw 'the glory of the LORD' appear in a cloud.

Throughout the Book of Exodus, the Presence of God is portrayed in a cloud. It was a pillar of cloud which led the Hebrew people through the desert by day. At Mount Sinai, God came to Moses in a dense cloud. On other occasions, when Moses entered the Tent of Meeting, the pillar of cloud descended to the door of the tent. In the First Book of Kings, at the dedication of the temple built by Solomon, a cloud filled the holy place, the house of the LORD. In the Gospels, Mark, Matthew and Luke, in the mystical vision of Jesus standing with Moses and Elijah on the mount of transfiguration, a cloud suddenly appeared. It is from the cloud that God spoke. In the mythology of the Tanakh (our Old Testament) and the Gospels, why did the ancients choose a cloud to portray the presence of God?

There is a wonderful story told by Rabbi Kushner of a time he had in a classroom discussing the nature of God with children. The rabbi asked, 'Tell me what you know about God for sure'. One pupil said, 'God made the world'. A second pupil said, 'God is one'. A third added, 'God's good.' There were some dissenting voices but the majority agreed that God was good. Another child said, 'God's invisible'. Before the rabbi could write up that answer on the board, one pupil objected: 'You're wrong. God's visible. God's right here,

right now'. The first child said, 'Oh yeah, I don't see Him. What's He look like?' The other child replied, 'That's just it....there's nothing to see'.

Wow! What an answer! In Judaism (and I hope in Christianity), God does not 'exist'. God is not born, does not die, and God has no form whatsoever. God is not an object of any kind in this material universe. It is not the case that, if we had different eyes, a different sort of brain, that we would somehow see God, that somehow God would no longer be invisible. When we speak of the Sacred, the Holy One, there is nothing to see. The Mystery of God is far more profound than that God is invisible: there is nothing to see. The ancients chose a cloud to portray the presence of God because we cannot penetrate a cloud with our eyes; we cannot see through it. It may additionally be because a cloud is the source of life-giving water. The One we call God is always beyond our vision and comprehension. St Augustine said, 'If you comprehend, it is not God'.

In the wilderness the people were miraculously fed with manna and quails. There may be a kernel of history behind these dramatic events. Some scholars suggest that the manna is a sweet, sugar sap,

a resinous secretion from the tamarisk tree, tasting like honey and no larger than a coriander seed. There are clues in the text. We are told that 'in the morning there was a layer of dew around the camp'. Dew is unusual in the desert but in Arabia, in the Hisma Desert, not only are the conditions right for the formation of dew, but in well-watered regions fed by streams from the mountains, tamarisk trees grow in large numbers. As to the quails, as far back as the Roman author Pliny, there is record of quails, after their winter feeding in southern Africa, flying north to Europe. Fat and exhausted from flight, the birds would regularly rest in large numbers in Arabia. They were easy prey.

The Hebrew people perhaps understood the manna and quails as deliberate acts of God but what is most important is that Moses told them that they do not live by bread alone. Moses said, 'One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of the LORD'. These very words of Moses are found on the lips of Jesus in His desert experience. The cloud in the desert reminded the people that the Holy One, the Divine Mystery, the One of whom there is nothing to see, was present with them on their journey, their pilgrimage, and in their suffering and misery. In the story, the

people had to lift their eyes from their complaints, from their everyday concerns; stop and look. They had to gaze into the wilderness, into the emptiness. Only when they stopped, and drew near to God did they see the cloud. We need that experience of emptiness to encounter the Eternal.

In the Gospel of John, Jesus told the crowd, 'Do not work for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures for eternal life...The true bread comes from the Father'. They said to Him, 'Sir, give us this bread always'. Jesus said, 'I am the bread of life'. We are to feed on the life, on the words, of Jesus. The life of Jesus is our nourishment. In Jesus, we are mysteriously and mystically drawn into God. In the Gospel of John, Jesus said, 'The Father and I are one...the Father is in me and I am in the Father. Jesus invites us into communion with Him. He said, 'Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood lives in me and I live in them'. We are to feed on the life of Jesus and become like Him, at one with Him and Eternity.

In our tradition, the word 'bread' suggests communion. The spiritual writer Jean Vanier says, 'Communion is about mutual presence'.

Vanier writes:

Mutual presence means, 'I am with you. I am *because* I am with you, my deepest being is revealed because we are together. Mutual presence implies humility, my sense of self fading into a reality of togetherness. It implies an abandonment of my self, of my preoccupations and reasons not to be there.....Presence is about marvelling at the beauty and the brokenness of others, listening to their words, hearing their pain, their joy, and caring about them.

We can see this mutuality in the eyes of lovers, in the warmth of friendship, in the love between parent and child, and in the contentment of community.

At L'Arche, the community established by Vanier for people with and without learning disabilities, Vanier tells the story of communion celebrated by community members. The prayers are not elaborate. A candle is lit, a song is sung and a short passage from the Bible is read. Each person is then invited to confide something in God; something for which they are grateful or a hope, a hurt, they want to share. Some people do not speak, knowing that God sees into the heart. Then, says Vanier, we hold hands and pray together The Lord's Prayer. He writes:

Whatever the struggles of the day – the sufferings, pain, imperfections, failings to love each one – we are gathered as children of God. The prayer is over, but no one rushes

to blow out the candle. At this moment, there is nothing else except to be in the presence of one another. A warm silence descends, our hearts are united into one heart. This is a moment of communion, a birth or rebirth of our deepest identity.

We are to feed on Jesus. As a Roman Catholic, Vanier finds nourishment in attending the Eucharist each day: 'keeping an appointment with Jesus, an appointment with love'. For Vanier, the Eucharist is a meditational means of bringing himself into communion with Jesus; with the common humanity which he shares with all human beings; his connectedness to the earth, to its diverse life; and his union with the universe, the ever-expanding, wonder-filled cosmos. Perhaps we too can keep an appointment with Jesus, nurture our sense of oneness: caring for another human being; silent prayer; meditating on the Bible or religious writing; attentively watching the feeding and flight of a bird; soaking up the beauty of a garden or a park; succumbing to the allure of the night sky.

In the wilderness the Israelites had to stop and look before they saw the cloud. It was in the desert they learned to feed on the word of God. We are to feed on the life of Jesus. He said, 'I am the bread of life'. Amen.