**1 August 2021; Trinity 9/ Proper 13**

**Exodus 16: 2-4. 9-15; Ephesians 4: 1-16**

**John 6: 24-35**

**1. A story:** sleeping with bread

I want to read a story from a book I have called ‘Sleeping with bread’. You will see later how this relates to our thoughts and readings today.

*‘During the bombing raids of WWII, thousands of children were orphaned and left to starve. The fortunate ones were rescued and placed in refugee camps where they received food and good care. But many of these children who had lost so much could not sleep at night. They feared waking up to find themselves once again homeless and without food. Nothing seemed to reassure them. Finally someone hit upon the idea of giving each child a piece of bread to hold at bedtime. Holding their bread, these children could finally sleep in peace. All through the night the bread reminded them ‘Today I ate, and I will eat again tomorrow.’(Linn and Linn 1995: 1)*

Todays reading is the first of those set for the next few weeks when Jesus is talking about bread. Our gospel reading today ends with the resounding words: *‘I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty’ (John 6; 35).* These words are so important that they will be repeated at the start of the gospel next week as Jesus elaborates on this theme.

**2. Starting with the gospel reading**

But first let us start with the incident itself before we consider what it might mean for us. Jesus has just performed a miracle, feeding well over 5000 people from two loaves and five fishes. They want more: more miracles or ‘signs’; more healing, more food. We cannot blame them. These are people living at subsistence level who do not always know how they will feed their families, and have no health service to tend their sick.

But Jesus tells them their focus is wrong. *‘Do not work for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures for eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you’,* he says (v27). Here he introduces a basic distinction between what keeps us going and maintains our physical life, and what maintains our souls. So we need to explore what this distinction means for us today.

**3. So what about us?**

We are in the fortunate position of not being short of the basics: food, shelter, health care. Yet there is a real hunger in our world for purpose and meaning.

A while ago I had an interesting message on our answerphone from our daughter. She has two young children, and a job and life is pretty full on in their house. She said this: “Mum, when you step back, everything seems the same, making meals, picking up lego bricks, and even holidays come and go. So what is the reason we are here? What is the driver for life? What makes you get up in the morning?”

I guess many people ask the same question. Add in perhaps the experience of getting older, with increasing aches and pains, a sense that whatever contribution we might have made to the world is now some time ago, and it is a real question. She wanted me to ring back with an answer. I wonder what you would have said. In our society, there is, I believe a real hunger for that which ‘*gives life to the world’* (v33), which Jesus calls the *‘bread of God’ (v33).*

**4. Lessons from the pandemic**

Strangely, it has taken the COVID pandemic to make many people realise what matters to them most in life, and what most sustains us as individuals and communities. How many times have we here realised how lucky we are to have unlimited access to the natural world, unlike many living in inner cities. Studies have shown the benefits of contact with nature for individual mental health in all age groups. And because the rules have stopped us having contact with others that we previously took for granted, we have realised how important these are for all age groups. Again, research has shown the effects even on the physical structure of our brains. The importance of unity and collaboration is emphasised by Paul in our first reading, as he speaks of each part of Christ’s body working properly, that this *‘promotes the body’s growth in building itself up in love.’ (Ephesians 4: 16).* This is as important in society generally as it is for the Church.

**5. Lessons from scripture**

From Jesus, we learn that God longs to do more than satisfy our physical needs. It is not that these needs are unimportant: Jesus did cure the sick and feed the hungry. But they are not the most important thing.

So how do we discover what really gives us life, what really satisfies our souls? Let me return to the story with which I started. It is from a book about a spiritual practice known as ‘The Examen’. This is a process first advocated by St Ignatius of Loyola, the founder of the Jesuit movement. His belief was that God reveals himself to us not just in scripture, but through reflecting on our own experience. And the process of the Examen is very simple. It is about taking time at the end of the day to look back and to ask ‘For what moment toady am I most grateful’ and: ‘For what moment today am I least grateful? ’ We can ask this question of our experience in many ways: ‘when did if give and receive most love, or when did I feel most alive?’

You do not have to be religious to find such a process helpful. A friend of mine who belongs to Alcoholics Anonymous has a practice of thinking at the end of the day of TWENTY things to be thankful for (I found I got stuck after about 10). But if we do have a faith, we believe that God himself will reveal to us what was most important in our day – not always the things we planned to get done or thought would be important. And as we get more used to having this conversation with God, he will guide us in the day to come.

Like the children who found comfort in literally sleeping with bread, we too can find comfort and renewed purpose in bringing to mind (and to God) those things for which we are thankful, the things that have made us feel more alive. This is the ‘*food that endures for eternal life’*, that God gives to us daily. Being thankful at bedtime gives us refreshment throughout the night, so that we are able to waken with another prayer of gratitude:

 ‘God thank you that I am alive today.

 Help me to do some good in it,’ **Amen**