

Sermon 21st July 2024

Great St Mary's 10.00am Sung Eucharist

Readings

1 Kings 19:4-8 (Elijah is fed cake and water by the angel...this sustained him for 40 days and 40 nights in the Wilderness until he arrived at Horeb)

Eph 4:25-5:2 (Positives: speak truth and words of grace, be kind, tender-hearted, forgiving, work and live honestly, share the produce of your labours, live in love, imitators of God- for we are members of one another. Negatives: Avoid falsehood, don't sin in anger/wrath, restrain evil talk, put away bitterness, wrath, anger, wrangling, slander, malice)

John 6:35,41-51 (I am the bread of life. Who comes to me will never be hungry. Who believes in me will never be thirsty. This is God's will. That all who see the Son and believe in him will have eternal life. Jesus will raise them up on the last day. No one can come to Jesus unless drawn by the Father. Everyone who has heard *and learned* from the Father comes to Jesus.

Opening prayer.

Lord Jesus, unfathomed love divine, help us to know more deeply that our lives are hid in God with thee, both now and through all eternity.

Amen.

The words in my opening prayer have been drawn from the last verse of George Brigg's Easter hymn, Now is eternal life. And it is an exploration of that strangest of first lines that I want to present today. Now is eternal life. In our Gospel reading today we heard Jesus' promise "Very truly, I tell you, who-ever believes has eternal life". This is an echo of perhaps the most famous promise of Jesus, spoken earlier in John's Gospel, and very often announced by the minister at the beginning of funerals, "God so loved the world that he gave his only son so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life". Of course, these words are a comfort to those who mourn. However, eternal life is not something we transition into at the point of death. Jesus's promises are in the present tense. Eternal life is something which is ours in the here and now and continues

irrespective of death. **Now** is eternal life. For Jesus, eternal life is the way of the Kingdom. It is a revolutionary and continually challenging way of living which requires not earthly food, but spiritual sustenance.

The writer of the Old Testament book Ecclesiastes, in a passage also often read at funerals, proclaims the haunting words that God has “written eternity in the hearts of men”, and I believe this imprinting of eternity deep in our souls is what gives us a spiritual hunger which we too easily divert or pacify through all-consuming distractions, overwork, addiction, wall to wall entertainment, all contributing to the the anxiety which besets so many of us in our seemingly increasingly chaotic world. St Augustine of Hippo, who I learned yesterday appears in one of the panels of the North Window of the St Andrew’s Chapel, wrote in his Confessions (an exploration of his own coming to faith), “You have made us for yourself, O Lord and our heart is restless (out of balance) until it find its rest (or balance) in you”.

Jesus is offering us the way out of our restlessness, our perpetual human hungering and thirsting for something which is different to what we have now. Twice in our reading, Jesus reminds us he is the bread for that hunger. The bread which offers us eternal life. He clarifies, it is through coming to him and believing in him that we pass through the gate into eternal life. But these are mysterious words, and we are a literal people. How do we make practical sense of them?

To help us reflect upon these mysteries, I’d like to share with you the story of a couple of recent encounters with some ducks who very kindly helped me come to some insights about eternal life.

The story I want to recount comes in two parts and in two locations. The first part begins in a rather upmarket riverside café in Goring on Thames. This popular location has a glass walled room, and is at river level on the water’s edge, which means customers can sit protected from the weather, but separated from the river only by glass and a wooden deck. I was there just a couple of weeks ago with a friend, and on that warm day, the glass

doors to the deck were wide open as were the windows. And then, in this strange human invention of an inside but pretending-to-be-outside cafe, in the aisle between the tables, walked a duck. Even with water so close by, a duck in an upmarket café is out of place. My friend jumped up to try to help the duck outside, and at the same time so did the young waiter person. The sudden human activity startled the duck, and she flew towards the water, but distressingly flew against a floor to ceiling glass window. The more people tried to help her the more she panicked, flapping again and again at the glass...with the open door only feet away. I could see her duck companions on the decking outside, and they were picking up on her panic; they could see her through the glass, and became agitated themselves. Thankfully, the duck somehow found her way out, and flew straight onto the river dipping her beak repeatedly in the water, as if for reassurance. Her companions on the deck were immediately calmed and normality was resumed, both inside and outside the café.

I reflected later that the duck who had found herself in that artificial human world of the cafe was rather like any one of us for much of the time. As Christians we know from scripture that this world in which we find ourselves is not our natural home; we are called to another life, not just in the future but in the here and now.

The duck encounter illustrated a profound difference between two worlds which were coexisting. In the cafe, the duck found herself in an arid and artificial space which suddenly became terrifying. And whilst there was an open door to the entirely different world of the river, she used up a lot of energy trying to escape by an impossible route, which could eventually have harmed her. She was indeed hungering and thirsting for freedom but was distracted by a false promise of the glass window.

Even as people of faith, we can spend much of our time feeling lost and desperate and seeking for solace in the wrong places. We readily get drawn into the arid promises of the world, the power it offers, its comforts and ease, and become too easily terrified by its chaos. All this can happen

without us noticing that we have lost our way from our true home, the place to which our God has been drawing us from the day we were born.

Like the duck whose home is not a café, but a watery existence shared with companions, our true home is in a totally different way of being and a different way of relating to each other than what we find modelled around us in the secular world. The author of the epistle explained to the Ephesians what this life would look like. It is a life of living in love as Christ loved, of speaking truth and words of grace, of being kind and tender-hearted, of forgiving others, of working and living honestly, of sharing the produce of our labours, and perhaps above all, remembering that in Christ we are not individuals but members of one another. We are interconnected and share in Christ's body. It's revolutionary stuff, and it is all about how we are in the here and now rather than the future, but so much of the time we don't find our way to the open door to fully experience it.

I said this was a two-part story. There is a post-script, and this happened last week by the Cam close to the technology museum, where the river sweeps in a broad curve. I was looking down to see if there were any ducks on this stretch of water. But then I heard a sound in the air coming from my right. A squadron of five ducks in V shaped formation, approached low over the river, swept in front of me and then disappeared in a triumphant arc up the curve of the river to my left.

And I realised here was another message about eternal life. These wonderful creatures are out of place in the human world, they at home on the water, but are completely glorious when flying in formation.

New life in Christ is eternal because not only does it offer a new way of being in the here and now, but just as waterbirds from time to time discover a joyful synchronised flight above their watery home, there is another level of eternal life, which is that of glory, reaching upstream to the very end of time.

Jesus said. Very truly I tell you, whoever believes has eternal life. I am the bread of life.

And so let us recommit ourselves to Jesus' offer of new and eternal life as we join *our* companions in Christ and come to His table today.

Amen.