

Hinde Street Methodist Church  
Sunday 1 August 2021  
11.00am Rev John Swarbrick

Ordinary 18 (B)

Exodus 16: 2–4, 9–15  
John 6: 24–35

### ***Bread for the World***

**F**AITH communities and the traditions in which they are rooted set a lot of emphasis on memory—events and stories that shape personal memory and collective memory. Then, at some point, memory slips into history.

The Reformation in the sixteenth century is now the stuff of Church history textbooks; but at what point does memory slip into history? One glance across the water to Northern Ireland confirms that its legacy is still with us. On the other hand, the development of the ecumenical movement over the last 100 years has been more positive, as different Christian traditions have become more open to learning about and understanding one another, and the treasures we can share.

The First World War is now history. There is no one alive now who served in the trenches. There are still people still alive who served in the Second World War, but their numbers are dwindling. At some not-too-

distant point, memory will slip into history; but I have a hunch that letting that happen will be resisted, because it continues very strongly to shape our sense of national identity.

We turn to our Scripture readings today and their strong focus on memory: our Old Testament reading about the manna in the wilderness shapes our New Testament reading about Jesus as the bread of life. In both cases, but especially in the reading from Exodus, it takes a long time for memory handed down as oral tradition to be turned into the written record we now have—and not without a lot of editorial work along the way. At a surface level, both readings are about God's interest in our survival, nourishment and well-being as human beings; but over time they have acquired many other levels of meaning for Jews and then for Christians.

We pick up the story of the ancient Israelites at a critical time in the understanding of their identity and history: Moses has led them from slavery in Egypt, but their arrival in the promised land is still a long way off. In the Sinai desert, they face starvation; they are saved from this by that strange food called manna. In Hebrew the word 'manna' means, 'What is it?'—in other words, the question they ask becomes the name of what they eat. But there's a bit more to it than that: this generous provision of food had an inbuilt anti-greed principle. The manna was enough for each day, but could not be hoarded. Try to make a profit out of it, and it would rot. This is why we pray in the Lord's Prayer, 'Give us today our daily bread'.

Then we tune into our New Testament reading from John 6, which begins with the feeding of the five thousand, is followed by the story of Jesus' walking on the water, and then brings us to what a good Jewish rabbi would have called a *midrash*—a sort of extended commentary on the meaning of the manna in the desert—except that our good Jewish rabbi here is none other than Jesus, the itinerant preacher from Nazareth. He tells his listeners that although Moses promised the Israelites that he was '*going to rain bread from heaven for you*' (Exodus 16: 4a), that bread was God's generous provision not Moses', and that *he* is the bread of life. In other words, he invites us to take him into ourselves as ultimate nourishment. Jesus' words help to shape our understanding of what we are about this morning as we gather round the Lord's table—food for the soul, food for the building-up of the body of Christ, food for the journey, food to remind us of those who have little or no food. But the heavenly banquet is minuscule: a crumb of bread and a sip of wine.

In almost all religious traditions, food is central to memory and history and identity: for Jews it is the Friday evening Shabbat/Sabbath meal and the annual commemoration of the Passover which are at the heart of what it means to be Jewish; for Christians it is the Lord's Supper, the Holy Communion, the Eucharist, the Mass—call it what you will—that is at the heart of what it means to be Christian. Remembering. Remembering through memory and history. Remembering to bring the past into the present.

Remembering is not the same as nostalgia. In any case, nostalgia isn't what it used to be. There was quite a lot of nostalgia around at the time of the Brexit referendum in 2016: Empire, Dunkirk, the Blitz, a resentful sense of English—and I mean English—exceptionalism which was being challenged by Brussels. I call it the Creation myth of modern Britain, or Genesis I rewritten to begin in 1940. This nostalgia gets more intense as each year goes by, I feel. Government messaging wants to convince us that we are still a 'Great Power' or 'Global Britain'. Dean Acheson, US Secretary of State in the early 1960s, once said, 'Great Britain has lost an empire and has not yet found a role'. Spot on at the time, and still true.

Remembering is not the same as nostalgia. From a faith perspective, remembering is necessary for communities of faithful people if they are to survive and live. Remembering is necessary for us if we are to stand honestly and openly before God who is the source of all love and true value. Remembering is necessary for us if we are to create a self-aware, self-conscious, distinct identity as God's people, recognizing who we are and whose we are. But that's not solely for ourselves. Remembering is necessary for us if we are to embody and offer the world a viable, alternative way of being truly human, living together humanely, and practising love, neighbourliness and justice.

Ancient Israel learnt how important this was. One after another, the superpowers of Egypt, Assyria, Babylon, Persia and Rome dominated this little Near Eastern nation, sought to impose their control over it, their vision

of reality, their values. How did Israel survive? By remembering. By the constant rehearsal of another vision of reality. By the practice of memory. By the knowledge that God calls his people into a relationship of trust. By daring to imagine that life can be different.

The same with the early Christians. The Roman Empire could be vicious and unpredictable in its persecution, seeking to impose its control over the fledgling Christian movement, its vision of reality, its values. How did the early Church survive? By remembering. By the constant rehearsal of another vision of reality. By the practice of memory. By the knowledge that God in Christ calls people into a relationship of trust. By daring to imagine that life can be different.

Shabbat, Passover, Eucharist. These are the means by which God's people remember, rehearse another vision of reality, are called into a relationship of trust, and dare to imagine that life can be different. I don't pretend this is easy. We still live with the aftershock of the banking crisis over a decade ago. Brexit is not yet done—I'm not simply thinking of Irish sausages. The international rules-based order that has kept the peace, broadly if imperfectly, is under threat from unscrupulous populist politicians and the more malign effects of digital media where people construct their own version of truth, and can't or won't distinguish fact from disinformation. Look at Belarus, look at Russia, look at Iran, look at Burma. Nearer to home look at Hungary, look at Poland. We become ever more fearful of simple human difference.

Now you may say to me, ‘But what can I do about all that global stuff? Little me?’ More than you think. To be a Christian, to give voice to alternative values, to live with radically different priorities, is to live in the present, with hope for the future, because we remember the significance of the past—of what God in Christ has done for us and is for us. You may have no personal memory of it, but give thanks for your baptism. And give thanks as you gather round the Communion table.

At font and table, the risen Christ invites us and all people to new life and communion with him—a deep identification with his self-giving, self-emptying love, demonstrated for us on the cross, but translated into new life and new hope on Easter Day. At the font we are given our identity as children of God; at this table we are nourished by Christ’s very life and equipped to find the resources and courage to live, to live imaginatively and well, and to live with the conviction that there is a common hope and a common calling for all human beings. Here, gifted and equipped by the Holy Spirit, we dare to act out the distinctiveness of what it means to call ourselves Christians, and to share that vision in word and action with other people for a world renewed.

O God, who took human flesh  
that you might be intimate with us:  
may we so touch and taste you  
in our bodily life,  
that we may discern and celebrate  
your body in the world;  
through Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen.**