

Sermon for Hinde Street Methodist Church - Sunday 9<sup>th</sup> August 2015 11am

Old Testament Reading: 1 Kings 19.4-8

Gospel reading: John 6.35, 41-51

Elijah was running away. He'd won the most amazing, gory victory over the priests of Baal on Mount Carmel, where they'd been competing to see which of their gods was greatest. After a great song and dance Elijah God won and he ordered the death of his opponents. When Queen Jezebel heard, she threatened Elijah with death, and Elijah was afraid so he ran away. But that wasn't the only reason. Later on, when God asks him why, he says "*I have been very zealous for the LORD, the God of hosts... I alone am left, and they are seeking my life, to take it away.*" In other words, "look, I've done all this for you. And even now you can't keep me safe. I'm alone. Life isn't worth living." He's at the end of his tether, despairing of life, and of God. After his monumental effort to prove God's power, he feels defeated, even though he's won. Neither Elijah's feelings, nor his wish to give up, are extraordinary. It can be the same for people whose illness has been successfully treated - or at least halted - by drugs or an operation. There's gratitude and an expectation that everything will go back to normal. But sometimes it doesn't happen like that, better health doesn't come, or it becomes clear that there's nothing more to be done. So we're left wondering about a future that has no certainty, and for some, only limited medical help. We know with our heads that resources aren't endless and human knowledge isn't complete. Yet we still hope for a cure (maybe even a miracle), or at the very least, the ability to manage our condition. And we seek them with all the energy and resources we have. For without hope, emptiness and despair can creep into part, or the whole, of our lives.

In today's readings, miracles happen as Elijah and the crowd chasing Jesus, are fed. For Elijah, the food and drink that enables him to continue on his journey, is bought by the angel of the Lord. He didn't ask for it. When he lay down under the broom tree he wanted to die. But God has more for him, so the angel wakes him a first, and then a second time. And the food he receives from heaven sustains him until he reaches Mount Horeb. Just as Elijah wasn't seeking the food God feeds him with. The crowd isn't either. They were following him because of the signs he'd been doing. They'll have heard the rumours about water being turned into wine. No one had proof it was Jesus, but the son of a royal official had been healed after he'd talked with his father and a disabled man who'd waited at the pool of Beth-zatha for 38 years, was walking. After that he was followed everywhere because the crowd "*saw the signs that he was doing for the sick.*" For people in Jesus' time, indeed people in all biblical times, illness, disability and blindness didn't just make life difficult. Impairment and disease was believed to be the result of sin. They made them unclean. And because they were unclean they were excluded from the community. So being healed wasn't just about being freed from the limitations of their disease or disability. It enabled them to participate fully in the life of the community. And some of the people in the crowd Jesus wanted a miracle, a miracle that would change their life, or the life of a family member. When Jesus saw the size of the crowd and the time of day he decided they need feeding. The story is well known, though we may have different views, about how they were fed. For some of us, there was a miraculous replication of the five loaves and two fish, for others it's a miracle of sharing. It doesn't matter which. The point of the story isn't what happened. Rather that it provides an opportunity for an extended dialogue about the work of God. But it all begins with basics.

Before anything else, is said or done, God provides for people. Elijah and the crowd are given food and water, just as the Israelites were given water and manna and quails, in the desert. God cares. God isn't only concerned with minds and spirits. God cares that our bodies are well-fed, cared for and when it is possible, healed. So in the face of the things happening in today's world, the situations and events that lead people to emptiness and despair and to want to lie down and die, we need to affirm that bodies matter. In earlier centuries the church founded hospitals all over the world, and even 'though many of the largest have been incorporated into national health services, in the poorest countries the church is still involved in offering primary health care. And I'm proud to be in a circuit that offers basic health care and sight tests to homeless people in the Day Centre. When people grumble about the so-called "undeserving" being helped, we need to challenge their grumbling with God's perspective that bodies matter, because more often than not the grumbling is rooted in the view that "what we have is ours." Jesus's invitation us to see God as the source of everything means we cannot own what we possess. *"I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry."* In the incarnation, God went further than sending angels with food, *"the Word... became flesh and lived among us."* God - the source of all that is - was born in human flesh. Flesh matters. It's the medium through which we meet God, whether it's in the form of another person, or in our own bodies. And when these are not taken care of - or we can't make sense of what's happening - we can find ourselves overwhelmed by emptiness and pain and despair. Yet in them, if we allow ourselves to, we meet our humanity which we experience best in our dependence on God and each other.

The crowd understands what Jesus is saying. They get that God is bothered about their bodily needs. Its why - in last week's reading - they ask for Jesus to feed them as God fed their ancestors in the desert. But what they don't yet grasp is that Jesus offers more. So they object when Jesus says, *"I am the bread of life."* How can he be? He's Joseph's son! So he can't possibly have come from heaven. Jesus continues, but instead of responding to their grumbling, he tries to take them deeper. He builds on what they should already know. That God has been working from the beginning to draw them into God's life. So he invites them to see beyond the miracles, to the gift of God's word - the story of God's endless effort to draw us into God's life - and to allow all the scriptures' stories of bread-giving, of care-giving and healing, to be redefined by his life and death and resurrection. To explain what he means, he returns to their challenge to him to feed them, as Moses had fed their ancestors in the wilderness. That manna, he says, could only feed their bodily emptiness, whereas the bread from heaven, gives eternal life. And just in case you think I've moved away from our real, bodily needs, let me be clear. Eternal life isn't primarily about what happens to us after life. Eternal life is life lived in the present, in touch with the fullest reality of the world, and our bodies. It's the invitation to see our lives, and the lives of others, as the place where God is working now. And so, to be open, to what God is doing in them - including - including in those whose presence makes us feel uncomfortable - the unclean, the odd, and the ill.

When we can stay with what is, rather than what we want or think we have a right to expect, we find ourselves in a different place. The pain, the despair or the emptiness doesn't just disappear, but it can be transformed. Simone Weil, a 20<sup>th</sup> century French mystic, speaks about emptiness as a void. But for her, the void was not something to be frightened of, or avoided because *"it is grace that forms the void inside of us and it is grace alone that can fill*

*the void.*" Grace enables us to recognise the emptiness and despair, whether it's momentary or enduring, and grace also provides the means by which the void is filled. Over the past year or so, as I've reflected on my own illness and tried to make sense of it, I've been reading the stories of other people who have tried to do the same. One has particularly impressed me. It's by Margaret Spufford who has lived with osteoporosis since she was in her 20s. Her body is painful and breaks easily. Yet she has had a family, has continued to work, and become an influential historian. When she was first diagnosed, the consultant said, *"there must be some kind of fundamental imbalance [in your body]."* It led her to wonder about Psalm 139, as I have done, as well. *"For it was you who formed my inward parts; you knit me together in my mother's womb..."* Later, her daughter Bridget was diagnosed with a rare, genetically-caused, metabolic disease. She found it harder to come to terms with this, than her own situation, but still insists on holding suffering and joy together in the title of her book *"Celebration - a story of suffering and joy."* In it, she wrestles with her experience, not to find an answer to the origin of the "evil" that has led to suffering for her, her daughter and others she refers to in the book, but because she believes this evil is transformed by God. *"Those things which were amiss,"* she says, *"seem to have been somehow woven into the fabric (of life) not entirely without detriment."* And that's my experience too. I'm not suggesting that given the choice anyone would choose their illness or disability, but given that we don't have a choice, I have found myself becoming more aware of the grace of being a created being. For not only does God provide all there is for human life. Illness and disability invite us to open ourselves God, for as we recognise that we're not in control, our doing becomes less important than we thought it was. This realisation brings a freedom that's not possible if we believe we are in charge of everything. So freedom from the need to control everything makes the waiting that always comes with illness possible. And it transforms the way we think about our bodies. Margaret Spufford writes, *"It may be tempting, in chronic pain, to give up on the body, to despair of it; but the Word was made flesh. It seems important to me that the incarnate Christ came to us, and into the world of ramshackle bodies. Mine is so very ramshackle that sometimes it is difficult to be patient with it. [But] learning to live with the disorder as creatively as possible has in the end formed the person I am."*

I suspect that the crowd were only just beginning to glimpse what Jesus meant when he tried to take them further. *"I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats of this bread will live forever; and the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh."* The verses that follow suggest that this is the beginning of John's version of the Synoptic Gospels institution narratives. Eating this bread, the living bread, will give us eternal life. But in these few words, we know that because John doesn't use words carelessly, he's saying more. *"Flesh"*, takes us right back to the beginning, *"the Word became flesh and lived among us."* And the phrase, *"give for the life of the world,"* echoes *"God so loved the world that he gave his only Son."* John's Jesus has known from the beginning that he will be rejected, because human beings choose dust and ashes and death, rather than the eternal life, for which we were created. So Jesus chooses death too. He chooses death, not because our bodies aren't valuable, but because without them human beings do not exist. We are not disembodied spirits. We are embodied beings, and even those of us who live in our heads, eventually realise that our bodies will not be ignored. One of my favourite prayers in the communion service is the one we pray when we bring bread and wine, as well as our gifts of money, to the table.

Lord and Giver of every good thing,  
we bring to you  
bread and wine for our communion,  
lives and gifts for your kingdom,  
all for transformation  
through your grace and love,  
made known in Jesus Christ our Saviour.

The group of disabled ministers in Birmingham I've spoken about before, have written their own version of it. Through it, they offer God everything, the whole of their experience. They start with the miracle that is our human body and then offer their joy, pain and vulnerability, their forgetfulness, wounds and scars, their aloneness and depression, disease and unease, their anger and tears, their "yes" to transformation and openness to God's life in their frailty. The refrain throughout the prayer, is "you offer yourself through everything, transform our lives, through grace and love." And it ends with these words. "All this and more we bring, all for transformation through grace and love, made known in Jesus Christ our Saviour." It's a powerful prayer, and after reading it I realised that my pituitary cyst and tiredness, can be included in it too. It is one of the "gifts" I have been given for life, just as the "gifts" they speak of in this prayer, are the "gifts" they've been given for life. The things that seem like death, that bring despair and pain and that feel like the end of life, need not be. For if death was not the end of Jesus' life it need not be the end of ours. And when we can move beyond passively accepting the things that seem deathly in our lives, when we can embrace the things that the wider world tells us are not life-giving and must be got rid of or controlled they are transformed. Margaret Spufford says, *"There is nothing I can do to transform all this pain. All we do is offer the pain."* For her, the most appropriate place to do this is in the Eucharist, where we share in the life and death the grace-giving, transforming self-offering of Jesus, *"who comprehend[s] all the realities of acute pain and death."*

I don't think I've said exactly what I wanted to say today. It may be because I haven't yet got all the words. Or it may be because it isn't possible to articulate something over which I only have limited control. But I want to end with this. What I see is that those who consciously struggle with their bodies, whether that struggle is with pain, with a different normality from the majority, or with the questions their condition raises, challenge anyone who believes they are in control of their bodies to think again. Just as Jesus invited the crowd to leave their search for miracles behind in order to participate in the more fulfilling search for eternal life, those who struggle with their bodies' experience offer those who haven't yet needed to, the insight that not only does flesh matter, but it is where God meets us. And when we open ourselves to God's presence in the emptiness, pain and despair of our condition, God's grace transforms it, so that it becomes a "gift." A gift that enables us to glimpse something of what Jesus' life, death and resurrection, offers all who succumb to despair. Not every day, and not in every moment, of course. But over time, in the company of those God provides to accompany us, and in the presence of the one who choose death to bring us life. Amen.

Sue Keegan von Allmen  
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