

Sermon for 11th August 2024

Preached at St Serf's Shettleston

Ephesians 4:25-5:2; John 6:35,41-51

Sermon

As our Gospel readings continue through chapter six of John's Gospel, not only do we hear a great deal about Jesus' claim to be the living bread that gives eternal life, but he also claims to have come from heaven, and to have seen God the Father. It's a series of outrageous claims that caused confusion and outrage among many who first heard them. There was after all a tradition at that time among the Jews that the Messiah would appear from obscurity without a family background, as if straight from heaven, but Jesus' parents are well known, so how can he be the one?

As usual, Jesus is confounding everyone's understanding and expectations of what God is like. In their eyes, God is far away in the heavens, or unapproachably hidden in the Jerusalem temple's Holy of Holies, inaccessible except to the High Priest, and then only once a year. The role of humanity from this perspective is to offer sacrifices to win God's forgiveness, favour and blessing. God sets the rules, and our job is to keep God fed by our offerings.

But here comes the mind-blowing reversal so typical of Jesus. He shows us that God is actually the one feeding *us*, coming among us in person, freely offering us grace, inviting us to participate in his divine life and love. We might take this idea of God rather for granted today, but back then it was a radical and outrageous shift in thinking.

While we're looking up at the skies, loudly bargaining for God's favour, God is already quietly present in the world, unnoticed by most, denied by many, offering himself to those who need him. In my mind, I picture the contrast between a

beautiful but empty temple, and a man in rough clothing handing out bread, love and wisdom in the dusty backstreets. If we focus attention on our human efforts to impress a far distant Lord, we might miss the fact that Jesus has sneaked in the back door, has already set the table for dinner, cooked the food, and made us the guests of honour!

It's not our religious rules that heal our pain, but encountering God's love, and especially at the most unexpected moments when we know we have nothing of our own to impress him.

For example, when I joined the nuns I just wanted to be trained to be good, because I knew I was too selfish to do good by my own efforts. I *wanted* the rules to be strict and hard! In a monastery I figured I would be protected from sin because I always had to do as I was told! And yet when I prayed, I still felt there must be a chasm between God and me, that God could never hear me because of my deep sinfulness. I still had this idea that God was distant, far away in heaven, not remotely interested in me, perhaps even unable to hear my prayers.

Then suddenly one day as I was praying, God said, "Why do you hate yourself when I love you so much?" I nearly jumped out of my skin. I had been mentally beating on the far distant gates of heaven, complaining about God's disdain and absence, and God was right beside me all along.

This unexpected experience of God's love and closeness is something I have never forgotten. I can't easily describe the experience, but it was perhaps something like Elijah asking God to take his life because he felt so useless, only for an angel to appear and tenderly serve him cakes in the wilderness, or like Mary Magdalene at the tomb, frantically anxious about where Jesus' body has been taken, only for Jesus to appear to her and quell her distress with the single word, 'Mary'.

This sudden awareness and experience of God's love and presence changes everything. It transforms us from rule-keepers to love-followers. It's why I always want to encourage everyone to spend time intentionally seeking God. We call it prayer, but it doesn't have to include words. It might simply be recalling God to mind as we pay attention to the beauty of our surroundings; or pausing to say thankyou for the life and breath within us and in our loved ones.

The protestant reformer Martin Luther apparently once said to his congregation, "I wish I could get you to pray the way that my dog goes after meat!" A rather graphic image perhaps, but I applaud the urgency! We never know when God is going to do or say something that changes our lives, so it's worth making the effort to listen.

It's this sort of vivid encounter with God, the God who comes when we're least ready for him, that saves us from becoming anxious rule-keepers always judging ourselves and being critical of one another. Everyone who truly encounters God comes away feeling affirmed, delighted in, caught up in heaven's joy, welcomed home, one of the family.

Our reading from the letter to the Ephesians appears to show what happens when a church forgets that Jesus is always here among us, humbly offering us the bread of life. The Ephesians had apparently become angry with each other, putting others down and even lying to justify themselves.

This letter can sound rather like a list of new rules for Christians to keep: tell the truth, don't steal, don't say mean things, be kind to each other and so on – the sort of rules we teach children – but I think it's more a description of what a healthy Christian church looks like after an encounter with God's love, and what can go wrong in a community that gets caught up in arguments about status or who did wrong to whom and who let us down and so on. In a community, we are all connected. Kind words build everyone up, but an unkind word *to* one person or *about* one person, grieves the Holy Spirit and it affects everyone.

Did you know that in Judaism, they have something called ‘Lashon Hara’, which means ‘evil tongue’? The idea is that even if something you say is true, if it has an unkind purpose, it is still a sin to say it. So much nastiness these days especially on social media is accompanied by the claim “But I’m only speaking the truth!” as if that justifies being intentionally cruel to any group you disapprove of. But God doesn’t care if what you’re saying is technically true. If it’s intended to hurt and exclude someone, then it’s still a sin to say it.

The abbess at the monastery used to tell the sisters that none of us come to God individually, but always as a member of a community. I think it’s the same for church communities. We come to God together, arm in arm, in love and kindness, or we come not at all. It’s why we confess our sins and share the peace before coming up to kneel together to receive the bread and wine. We are here to experience being loved despite our flaws, perhaps even *because* of them, and then to go and welcome others in the same way.

What all our readings today have in common is a powerful reminder that we cannot do any of this work by our own efforts alone. Moral and religious rules are not enough to win favour with God or one another. If we try, we will, like the Ephesians, end up blaming one another for the failings that we can’t face up to in ourselves.

But God is always handing out bread and making cakes for those who think they’re unworthy and unlovable. So when we come up to receive the bread at the altar rail, remember that this is our God saying: you’re okay, you’re welcome, you’re included, you’re forgiven, you’re loved, and then maybe glance sideways at those who are journeying with us on the same road, and wish them also a heart full of joy and peace, so that all shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of things shall be well.