

26 August 2018



Readings:

1 Kings 8. 22-30, 41-43

Ephesians 6. 10-20

Gospel: John 6. 56-69

Last night, our family went to see a Shakespeare play, 'Much ado about nothing', in the Open Air at Jimmy's farm in Ipswich, something we have done for the last 5 years. As you may know, I am a great lover of Shakespeare, and his comedies have made for a great evening of entertainment for a Summer's evening. But Shakespeare did not just write comedies, he wrote histories, tragedies and other plays that are commentaries on society, and Shakespeare was a great story teller in that he creates the characters but does not judge them. One lesser known play is "Timon of Athens" which is about a philanthropist called Timon, a wealthy man who loves to show his wealth and influence by putting on great feasts, giving gifts to his friends, settling their debts etc. and so his household is full of followers. Timon is warned by his servant that his wealth is diminishing but ignores it, and then suddenly he discovers that he is bankrupt and owing money. He sends a note to his friends that he has helped asking them for gifts to settle his debts, as he has helped them, but they all refuse. He gives them one last feast, when he turns on them and serves up just water. The rest of the play is a reflection on the fleeting lure of riches.

The play reminds me a bit of the story of the prodigal son who wastes his fortune on wine, women and song, and then is in need and all his friends desert him. These stories are there to help us to learn what is truly important in life- relationships and kindness and trust, and how easy it is to get into a rut following other things- money, career, power, fame and so on, and for us as Christians, it is a salutary lesson that although we are committed to following God's way, we can so easily get complacent and get into a habit of doing what is easy, where we just have to do what we have done before, and sometimes living off the spiritual capital of others, or of our past. What I mean by this is that we may have had godly parents or ancestors, we may have been very committed and sought God earnestly in our past, but it is so easy to rely on that and not on a living relationship with the living God through Jesus Christ. We can get complacent about bible reading, - done that- complacent about prayer- I have all I need- complacent about church attendance- don't have to go to church to be a Christian, complacent about our need to love our neighbour in practical terms – who is my neighbour. And if, like me you are in ministry, it is very easy to become complacent and trust in what God has done in the past and rely on our position as a leader and priest and our experience and 'coast' through the services. Have you ever got out of a car and realised you cannot remember the journey? I sometimes, to my shame feel like that at the end of a service- I have said the right words, prayed the right prayers, but I cannot remember what the sermon was about, even if I have preached it!

The Lord knows how fickle human beings are and there are many warnings in scripture, and exhortations e.g. **Hebrews 2:1 ¶ Therefore we must pay greater attention to what we have heard, so that we do not drift away from it.** And in different ways our readings from 1 Kings and John's gospel are warning against complacency and reminding us that we must always remember that we are dealing with the living God, maker of heaven and earth, and not to try to seek God for what we can get out of him, like the friends of Timon of Athens or the friends of the prodigal son.

In 1 Kings reading Solomon dedicates the temple, but in his prayer he reminds himself and the people that the Lord is the God of all the earth and that the temple is only a symbol of God's presence- he is far bigger than anything we can imagine.

27 "But will God indeed dwell on the earth? Even heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain you, much less this house that I have built!

I have just built this temple, but it is inadequate, but it is a sign of how great you are. Then if the people get that right, and only then can it function as a sign of God's presence among them.

28 Regard your servant's prayer and his plea, O LORD my God, heeding the cry and the prayer that your servant prays to you today;

29 that your eyes may be open night and day toward this house, the place of which you said, 'My name shall be there,' that you may heed the prayer that your servant prays toward this place.

30 Hear the plea of your servant and of your people Israel when they pray toward this place; O hear in heaven your dwelling place; heed and forgive.

This is not just for Israel but for all who will come to worship the true God at this place.

41 "Likewise when a foreigner, who is not of your people Israel, comes from a distant land because of your name

42 --for they shall hear of your great name, your mighty hand, and your outstretched arm--when a foreigner comes and prays toward this house,

43 then hear in heaven your dwelling place, and do according to all that the foreigner calls to you, so that all the peoples of the earth may know your name and fear you, as do your people Israel, and so that they may know that your name has been invoked on this house that I have built.

This is how the temple should have functioned, but sadly the history of Israel and Judah was one of complacency, idolatry and disloyalty, so much so that 500 or so years later Judah fell to the invading Babylonians and the temple itself was destroyed in 586 BC. Imagine that, the symbol of God's people among them destroyed and the people taken off into exile? Where is God? He is where he had always been, but he would not let the people use the temple as a piece of religious protection, as the prophets said, crying out 'the temple of the Lord. The temple of the Lord' as if that would save the people from the invasion. The temple of the Lord was destroyed and the ark of the covenant, the symbol of God's presence among His people was lost.

But God has promised to send a saviour a messiah who will restore all things. The temple is rebuilt under Ezra and the city rebuilt under Nehemiah, and then some 400 or so years later, the temple is rebuilt under Herod the great. But the people of Israel know that the presence of the Lord they knew under Solomon and David has not been restored, despite the new temple. And when Jesus, comes he comes to Herod's temple and does not think much of it- it looks good on the outside, but the worship is not right. Later on, as we know, he will cleanse the temple and when He is challenged he says, destroy this temple and I will rebuild it in three days, the temple he meant was of course, His body. Jesus knows that many of people are trusting in religious activity rather than in a real relationship with God.

So we come to our bible reading from John, the culmination of the teaching on the living Bread come down from heaven, following the feeding of the 5000. Jesus withdraws from the people, walks on the water and lands away from the crowds. He is not pleased when the crowds find him because he suspects their motives

Joh 6:24 So when the crowd saw that neither Jesus nor his disciples were there, they themselves got into the boats and went to Capernaum looking for Jesus.

25 When they found him on the other side of the sea, they said to him, "Rabbi, when did you come here?"

26 Jesus answered them, "Very truly, I tell you, you are looking for me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate your fill of the loaves.

27 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. For it is on him that God the Father has set his seal.

Jesus was tempted in the desert to produce bread and to do the spectacular to draw a crowd. Jesus has fought off this temptation, but it resurfaces here in Galilee. You can imagine the people's thinking, "Do the miracle again so we can have bread, and we will follow you. This is the one, like Moses, who gives us bread from heaven, we will follow him for the miracles." But Jesus will have none of it. The miracles are signs of the kingdom of God – proof that He is the one come down from heaven, the Messiah and the Son of God. People should seek Him for this and not for the signs, just like people should seek God for himself and not just because of a spectacular temple.

So he says this- **56 Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them.**

57 Just as the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father, so whoever eats me will live because of me.

58 This is the bread that came down from heaven, not like that which your ancestors ate, and they died. But the one who eats this bread will live forever."

Now, as we are the other side of the cross and resurrection we can see this as prefiguring the Holy Communion, bread for his body and wine for His blood, but the people then did not know this. They saw these words as an impossible riddle – how can we eat Jesus' flesh and drink his blood? They did not understand that it meant to trust totally in Jesus, to trust in what he gave them as food- his words- and his life as a ransom- his blood- would mean. They wanted to follow Jesus for what they could get out of Him- complacency- following Him in the good times and when it is all clear, and not in the difficult times when the meaning is obscure. So many of them fall away- no, He is no good, I do not understand it, it is not within my understanding therefore I will leave it and go back to what I knew before, where my religion is safe.

But some of the disciples, at least the 12,

67 So Jesus asked the twelve, "Do you also wish to go away?"

Will you leave me or will you take the act of trust and faith and follow me despite not knowing it all or understanding it all?

68 Simon Peter answered him, "Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life.

69 We have come to believe and know that you are the Holy One of God."

Peter speaks, your words Lord are life, we know we can go nowhere else but to follow you, you are the Son of God, or as Martin Luther said before the Roman Curia, Here I stand, I can do no other."

I have no choice but to decide to follow you and go on with you, I am not following you because of something I can get out of it, or because I like it, I am following you because I know that there is no other way but the way of Jesus.

Jesus has the words of eternal life and these lead us to God. I wonder, is that our motivation each Sunday? To come to encounter God in word prayer and sacrament? All of our way of doing things, our worship, our music our liturgy our fellowship and activities are good, I hope. But they are nothing compared with meeting with the living God through Jesus. But if we use what we do on a Sunday as an opportunity to encounter God afresh, then our faith comes alive and is animated by what we do in word, prayer and sacrament. An old man who had been a Christian for many years heard the gospel preached and said afterwards "Well, I got saved again tonight." What he meant was, I heard the gospel and I responded to the call to follow Jesus again tonight" That should be our experience each Sunday, and if it is not, or you have got a bit rusty or complacent, then pray that it is your experience today. Do not be like the friends of Timon of Athens and come for the gift not the giver or like the friends of the prodigal son, hanging around someone who is showering their money around. Do not be like the early followers of Jesus who liked the miracles and being provided for, loved being among religious people, but then when things happen they do not understand or when persecution comes, fall away. Do not be like the people of the temple and synagogues who saw Jesus as a disturber of their religious complacency- Jesus is the living temple, the living Church as our head. It is jess that we must seek, again and again and again, sometimes reminding ourselves that we have got a bit too comfortable and complacent, and we need to seek the presence of God again in Jesus. Perhaps this may mean that we go 'Back to School' as my September article says, and re-join a housegroup or a study group like Alpha or Pilgrim. We need to be shaken up a bit, reminded that we cannot just rely on how things have always been. Because our God is the living God and wants relationship- wants our attention, our prayers our worship and our obedience.

As the song goes

I bow my knee before your throne

I know my life is not my own

I offer up this song of praise

To bring you pleasure Lord

I seek the giver not the gift

My heart's desire is to lift

Him high above on earthly kings

To bring you pleasure Lord

At New Wine conference 2 weeks ago we heard a speaker called Miriam Swaffield, who whilst doing a job with students felt the call of God to move to a poorer town and just encounter her neighbours and show them the abundant love of God. She said this. "I want to live a life that makes no sense at all to others, unless the resurrection of Jesus is true."

I wonder if we can say that today. I found it a challenge, but a challenge from God to shake off complacency, and to seek Him, seek His face, in all the ordinary things I do and in our weekly worship and to find a way of following Jesus where I can say , I have no choice but to go this way, my life makes no sense unless you are real, the gospel is true, and to say like Peter

"Lord, to whom can I go? You have the words of eternal life. I have come to believe and know that you are the Holy One of God."

Let us pray

**You are the King of glory,
You are the Prince of Peace;
You are the Lord of heaven and earth,
You're the Sun of righteousness.
Angels bow down before You,
Worship and adore, for
You have the words of eternal life,
You are Jesus Christ the Lord.**

**Hosanna to the Son of David!
Hosanna to the King of kings!
Glory in the highest heaven,
For Jesus the Messiah reigns.**