

**SERMON FOR TRINITY 11 AT STEEPLE LANGFORD:
11 AUGUST 2024 (based on 1 Kings 19:4-8; Ephesians 4:25 - 5:2;
John 6:35, 41-51)**

God will provide reassurance and spiritual nourishment

Today's readings teem with various, not always positive, human attributes. They include our neediness, our frequent inability to see things in a fresh light, and our capacity to be abrasive or nasty. Those readings also have something to say about how we, with all our imperfections, relate to God. I wonder how much of ourselves we recognise in those imperfections.....

In 1 Kings, poor Elijah is feeling very sorry for himself. Mind you, he has reason to. He had been doing so well, performing miracles and championing YHWH in Ahab's kingdom..... until Jezebel vowed to seek revenge on Elijah for killing the prophets of Baal, so he fled into the desert. We find him there full of self-doubt, feeling abandoned, and asking God to take away his life. He simply cannot carry the weight of prophetic responsibility any longer. When he talks of his ancestors, he may be thinking of Moses, who had similarly asked God to let him die. At extreme low points in life, the desire to give up is understandable. And God clearly understood that too, because instead of getting angry and rebuking Elijah for his weakness, he provides food to build up his strength and enable him to continue. God still had work for Elijah, but he gave him strength, and knowledge of his presence, to carry it out. He knows our weaknesses. We just need to trust him to make us strong.

The text from John continues the lectionary's focus on Christ as the bread of life. In the past two weeks, we have encountered a hungry crowd, frightened disciples in a boat, and that same crowd stalking Jesus round the Sea of Galilee. Human insecurities abound, and do so again as the crowd starts to complain, to question how the son of people they know can come from heaven. It is somewhat ironical that the crowd's professed knowledge of Jesus' father and mother simply highlights their ignorance of God, the Father who sent him. Their self-assured knowledge is a barrier to understanding what Jesus is saying.

And we can sense the atmosphere becoming tense and combative. But instead of seeking to tone down the antagonistic grumbling, Jesus' response is assertive. He brings God firmly into the exchange, saying to them: "Everyone who has heard and learned from the Father comes to me". It is God who directs us to Jesus, because it is in the Son that we shall be shown the Father.

Do we hear a reproach, an implication that they do not believe Jesus because they have not heard and learned? It seems likely, as a few lines later he points out: "Your ancestors ate of the manna in the wilderness, and they died". The Jews fail to see that something new is happening - they are being offered bread that sustains eternally, not temporarily. "I am the living bread that came down from heaven" says Jesus. "Whoever eats this bread will live for ever". Their inability to understand Christ's message results from trying to fit him into their frame of reference. We need to bear in mind that by the time this Gospel was written, the Jewish and Christian communities had grown apart. For Jews, bread of life equated to manna in the desert, a miracle of feeding that physically kept their ancestors going. Jesus was offering a different context in which he describes himself as the 'living' bread, likewise coming from the Father, but not to assuage physical hunger. We, 2000 years later, can hear sacrificial overtones. We can make the connection with what happens to Jesus later and are therefore better able to interpret Christ's words: "the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh". Jesus, the bread of life from heaven, is to be the sacrificial lamb. He will give new life to the world by dying for it.

We turn to Paul now for advice on some rules for that new life. In his letter to the Ephesians, he sets out a list of vices and another summarising acts of kindness. This part of Paul's letter acknowledges our inherent imperfections. Yes, we get angry at times, but shouldn't allow it to make us do something we may regret - deal with it before the day is out. To err is human, but to fail to see when we get things wrong, and not try to make up for it, runs contrary to Christ's teaching. Paul exhorts us to "be kind to one another", a play on words as the Greek for kind is 'chrestoi', and for Christ is 'Christos'. So we are to be Christ to

one another, “imitators of God, as beloved children”, as Paul puts it. Though we can only imitate God if we know Christ. He came among us so that we would have a template on which to base our relationships with each other and with God. When Jesus walked among us, he became the footsteps of God, showing us life’s path along which God’s love draws us. As Jesus said to that crowd by the lake, “No one can come to me unless drawn by the Father who sent me”. Our relationship with God the Son is made possible through God the Father, and vice versa.

The Old Testament reading suggests God knows us better than we know ourselves. The crowd’s reaction to Jesus’s words in the Gospel reading suggest that they in turn lack understanding of God. Do we, despite, the benefit of hindsight also fall into that trap? Paul tells us that Jesus himself is the template for life. God came to live among us imperfect creatures, not so that he could know us better, but so that we would come to know him.

So how do these readings speak to us today? I think that Elijah’s experience tells us that God is there for us, even when at times of extreme desperation, we think he isn’t - which I find comforting. Jesus’ set-to with the crowd teaches us not to assume that the little we know means we have God sussed - which is appropriately humbling. And Paul shows us ways in which, despite our imperfections, we can live harmoniously together - a goal to work towards, knowing that we have Christ’s love.

In the light of these readings, may we find in our relationships with God and with those around us, renewed faith, humility and gratitude.

In the name of Christ, amen.