

Sarah Thomas Sunday 26 July 2015

Ephesians 3:21 to end and John 6:1-21

There's a song from my childhood, from my time at Sunday school, that started to run like a thread through my mind as I thought about the words, 'being rooted and grounded in love and experiencing the breadth and length, and height and depth of Christ's love'. It's a simple song: Jesus love is very wonderful – so high, you can't get over it, so low you can't get under it, so wide you can't get round it, oh wonderful love. It was something I found comfort in as a child. But somehow, listening to those words as an adult, I hear this 'love' as standing like a stone in my path, a socking great obstacle. Something to look at, wonder at, the sheer size of it, but not actually experiencing it. And that's when I realise that there is something missing in the song. It somehow suggests that Jesus' love is an external thing. Instead Paul wants us to experience it. Yes, it **is** so broad, long, tall and deep, but it is something that comes into us, something that fills us, not something we have to find a way through. It is something that gives us new energy, new possibilities, renews and refreshes us. It enables us to live lives that reflect the love of God.

And yet, we see a world where there is so much pain. Where the history of the church shows that being Christian doesn't mean that pain, suffering, hunger, sickness, war and famine will go away. Sometimes those things are even made worse at the hands of Christians.

Putting aside the wider issues in the world, is it right that there are people in this city who, having worked hard all week, find that after they have paid their rent and utility bills, there is little or nothing left for food? Why doesn't Jesus find ways to feed them? What was the purpose of feeding the 5 thousand?

John's gospel constantly asks us to think about the context of what he is saying. One of the clues here to opening up the passage, to making it more than just an amazing story of a small boys' small lunch, is in the words – the time of the Passover was near. Celebrating Passover is the time of remembering the liberation of God's people from slavery in Egypt. The Israelites were led by Moses. They gave him a hard time. They were in the desert and grumbling about lack of food, and God has compassion on them. Every morning when they awake, the land is covered with manna, bread from heaven, which they gather and mill, grind, boil and shape into cakes. The crowd following Jesus will have heard the echo of that story. They will also have linked his actions to those of Elisha, who fed 100 soldiers with only 20 small barley loaves. God, Moses, Elisha and now Jesus feed people out of compassion. And the crowd sees the recreation of earlier miracles. And they leap to one conclusion, that Jesus should become their king.

What did Jesus do? He withdrew. He isn't a king in a secular earthly sense. He wants the crowd to make the connection with Moses and Elisha, but, as you may hear in more detail next week, he wants people to begin to see that he is Bread of Life, the Son of God. He withdrew to the mountain by himself.

Again, there are echoes of the past in this. A much more recent past than the times of Moses and Elisha, one just at the beginning of his ministry. When, after his baptism, he withdraws into the wilderness and is tempted three times by the devil.

He is taunted: if you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread.

Wouldn't that be wonderful? So practical – no one need ever be hungry again. But he refused. His ministry is not just a practical one. His compassion is deeper and more radical. And it's more radical than just turning his followers into providers of food, health care and so on. He wants us to know his love, to become suffused, to be marinated in, steeped in and transformed by it. To know that we are each precious, each loved for who we are.

Henri Nouwen reflects on what might mean. He became very concerned that the pattern of the world asks us to think of ourselves only as what we do, as what others say about us and as what we possess. When what we really are beloved daughters and sons of God. That we needn't seek to be relevant.

"I am deeply convinced that the Christian leader of the future is called to be completely irrelevant and to stand in this world with nothing to offer but his or her own vulnerable self. This is the way Jesus came to reveal God's love... Jesus' first temptation was to be relevant: to turn stones into bread. Oh, how often I have wished I could do that!... Aren't priests and ministers called to help people, to feed the hungry, to save those who are starving? Are we not called to do something that makes people realize that we do make a difference in their lives? Aren't we called to heal the sick, feed the hungry, and alleviate the suffering of the poor? Jesus was faced with these same questions, but when he was asked to prove his power as the Son of God by the relevant behavior of changing stones into bread, he clung to his mission to proclaim the Word and said, "One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God" (Matthew 4:4)."

I watched a sermon he gave on this, the link is in written version which will be available on our website.

<https://themysteryofchrist.wordpress.com/2012/07/23/henri-nouwen-being-the-beloved-sermon-1-of-8/>

I don't think Henri Nouwen is suggesting that we ignore the practical needs of others. It is ethically right to follow Jesus' example and to nourish people with real food first, We support the work of the Sisters of the Church. Their Loaves and Fishes Project, based in St Pauls, has seen an increase in the numbers of people who need their help and a decrease in the donations of food and money. Sister Annaliese will be visiting us in September, but it would be good to be thinking already how we can each respond to their harvest appeal for tinned and dry goods. I confess that I have fallen out of the habit of buying a few extra things when I shop an It's probably a habit I should get back into. Meat, tuna, rice pudding, baked beans, soup, vegetables, tea, coffee, rice and pasta are always welcome.

But it doesn't stop there, and practical food needs also to be followed by spiritual nourishment. That's the bit that I think Henri Nouwen means when he talks about being irrelevant. There is no way to say – this is what I do, what people say about me and what I possess - when we look at learning to being and acting as beloved by God.

And a response to this suggested irrelevance can be found back where I started, in Paul's letter to the young church in Ephesus and seeing the love of Christ, not as an external thing, but an internal one. The disciple Andrew didn't know what to do about the food that he found, but he did know that if he brought it to Jesus then something might happen with it. And so too, we do not know what it really means to be fed by God, it is mysterious just how our soul is nurtured. Many people find it in contemplation. Being still. By putting aside (even for a brief moment) the busyness, the plans, the strategies, the congestion of our lives, and to pray. For the words of the epistle are actually the end of a prayer. Paul's prayer is about love and power. About the power of love, not the love of power. So many people I know are looking for peace, looking for an end to nagging anxiety and are finding it in old fashioned ways. Learning to nurture gardens, to embroider, colouring books for adults as a form of mindfulness are very popular, activities that slow us down. And so too can prayer. May we learn to accept that God wants to love us. And may we give Him the space, the opportunity to receive his spiritual food.

Let us be still now. Let us hear and feel our own heart beat. Let us thank God that we are his beloved daughters and sons.

Amen.