

I Kings 8:22-30, 41-43

Psalm 84

Ephesians 6:1-20

John 6:56-59

“This teaching is difficult, who can accept it?”

We find ourselves this morning in the continuing teaching about the living bread that we have been following for the past few weeks. If you have missed it then, in a nutshell, we began with the feeding of the five thousand with the five loaves and two fish, assuring us of God’s abundant love and spiritual nurture for all who come; we learned that we are also spiritually fed by the Word and scripture and that all we need to do to receive this living bread is to believe in him. If we do so, then as we come to share in the body and blood of Christ, in Word and sacrament, we will be saved and live in the promise of eternal life. Not a bad return really for showing up on a summer Sunday, right?

Throughout this chapter in John’s Gospel, as each new revelation has unfolded, we have heard the questions and protestations of the Jewish authorities. This is quite reasonable really, when you consider the threat Jesus posed to the traditional way of things. Many of these questions have been questions that we too have voiced, I am sure. It’s my experience that when we have questions about our faith, sometimes we dare not probe too deeply for fear of losing it altogether. So, it is always heartening to me to hear that others feel that way too. Especially here, because these are Jesus’ followers, his disciples, the very ones who were walking with Him, hearing Him firsthand, breathing the very air that he breathed, and yet they still had misgivings:

“When many of his disciples heard it, they said: ‘This teaching is too difficult; who can accept it?’”

They are just like us then, we discover, and we should take heart when we feel things are too difficult – we are not alone it seems.

“Does this offend you” we hear Jesus ask his twelve disciples. *“Then what if you were to see the Son of Man ascending to where he was before? It is the Spirit that gives life, the flesh is useless; the words I have spoken to you are spirit and life...but among you there are some who do not believe.”*

This Gospel is about faith. Jesus knows that even if we had all the proof that was possible, even seeing into wherever He came from, it would not fully convince the human, fleshly nature of ourselves. Jesus knows how desperately we want to domesticate God. To be able to explain it all rationally, to control our understanding of God and tie it all up neatly in a box, with a bow and say, “There we are then!”

This human wish to control God brings to mind the ongoing debate between atheists and believers. But it isn’t really a debate at all, because neither side speaks the same language. The atheists saying, “If there is a God, prove it.” And the believers saying “there is no proof – believe.” Just like the Gospel this morning.

On that point, I spotted an item in my internet trawling about Dr. Francis Collins being tipped for the Director of the National Institutes for Health. This interests me because Francis Collins also headed the Human Genome Project which decoded the DNA of humans. He wrote a wonderful

book titled “The Language of God.” His writing is understandable for the non-scientist and offers an insight into the marvel of our species in theological terms. He cites that despite sharing almost our entire DNA with other creatures, and the chimpanzee in particular, it is in the degree of evolution of some genes that our uniqueness is found. Especially in language and an ability to have a moral code that leads to altruistic behavior. I can’t do it justice here, so I urge you to read it. However, I do want to have his words speak to today’s gospel and our present day dilemma: In a CNN exclusive on April 6th, 2007, Collins said:

“I have found that there is a wonderful harmony in the complementary truths of science and faith. The God of the Bible is also the God of the genome. God can be found in the cathedral and in the laboratory. By investigating God’s majestic and awesome creation, science can actually be a means of worship.”

For me this is significant especially in relation to our children, many of whom are unchurched. The emphasis in their world is in science and technology which is changing at a tremendously rapid pace. The gulf between the language of science and the language of God is becoming wider all the time. The voices of atheism are loud and getting louder. How, unless people of faith like Francis Collins speak out, can our children know that what they are learning about in astronomy and biology is a description and deeper understanding of God’s action in the world?

Interestingly, however, the opposite of faith is not atheism. It is apathy. Many people are simply apathetic about faith. My own country is witness to that and so is Europe. That is the real danger to our children. St. Paul talks of the cosmic dangers referring to the capricious action of the pagan Gods (remember this was in the time of the Romans, who adapted and embellished upon the Gods of Greek mythology). But you know there are just as many cosmic dangers for our kids in the internet world. Their lives are full of challenges, just as our youth was too (even if they all believe we were never young!). But their challenges seem to be more deadly, more immediate and less visible than ours. If we deny our children the opportunity to hear God’s word, to learn the difference between right and wrong and to know that they are beloved children of God, how then will they be able to protect themselves with the breastplate and helmet of faith and truth that Paul refers to? The dangers today are no less real; evil, greed, lust, power are still very much with us. How will they know that Christ is with them as they struggle to chart the waters of life?

The way of Christ is not easy. The teaching has always been difficult, but sometimes the lessons we learn best just are. We are called to be persistent and faithful especially when the going is tough. And it may well be during this interim period at St. Barnabas. When we waver and fall away, and it all feels too hard, we may well hear Jesus say to us, “*Do you also wish to go away?*” But if we work together, and draw our sustenance from his Word, the living bread; from His Love, in the spiritual bread of abundance; from His Body and Blood in the sacrament of Holy Communion together, then we will know that He abides in us and is with us for the duration. Then, our answer will be, must be, with Peter, “*Lord, to whom can we go?*” +

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