

Eleventh Sunday after Trinity 2018 (12.08.18)

1 Kings 19: 4 – 8; John 6: 35, 41 – 51

You may find this difficult to believe, but I reckon, bringing to bear on the problem all my powers of self-perception, that there's an outside chance I might be beginning to become a grumpy middle aged man. And one of the things that gets my goat is when people start sentences using pronouns. This is the matrimonial burden I have to bear; and then *I* get into trouble when I bluster in my exasperation "I don't know who you're talking about!"

And I can't even get away from it in church. The Old Testament lesson begins "But he himself went a day's journey . . ." and nowhere in the whole passage does it actually tell us who *he* is. You've got to go hunting around and reading back; and what you discover is that *he* is Elijah. And, of course, Elijah isn't any old prophet. Elijah is a prototype – as is Moses – of the saving action of God we see supremely and universally

achieved through Jesus. Remember, the story tells us that Elijah didn't die: he was assumed into heaven; and people were looking forward to his return. In fact there's a story in the Gospels that when Jesus asked the disciples who people were saying he was, some were saying he was Elijah, returned to complete his mission.

And there are a number of parallels between these two prototypes of salvation, Elijah and Moses. There are parallels between this morning's reading and the Moses story. Elijah had fled into the wilderness because he had killed a load of dodgy prophets: Moses fled into the wilderness after he killed an Egyptian slave master. In this story Elijah "came and sat down under a solitary broom tree" and had an encounter with God: Moses encountered God at the burning bush. Elijah was miraculously fed, received spiritual sustenance and the physical strength to go on with his journey: Moses received manna from heaven and that

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also gave spiritual sustenance as well as the strength for their journey through the wilderness.

So there's a pattern emerging. And the pattern is the pattern of God's salvation. These are the prototypes. And the archetype – the final production model that they precede – is the salvation of God we see in and experience through Jesus. Moses and Elijah get miraculous food from heaven: the ultimate miracle is that Jesus is the living bread that came down from heaven.

What we hear Jesus say in this morning's Gospel reading is that "the bread that will give . . . is my flesh." And it's no coincidence that when we hear those words we think of the words we hear every time we gather round the altar: "take, eat: this is my body given for you." Jesus' words in the Gospel reading are a deliberate reference, or at least an allusion, to Holy Communion.

We need to remember that the Gospels are very late documents. We tend to think that, because we find them in our Bibles at the beginning of the New Testament, and because they deal with events from which everything else originates, that means they came first, were the earliest documents. But the Gospels were written way after St Paul and all that stuff. And what we call St John's Gospel was last of all. Even on the most conservative view, it was written decades after the events it recalls. And some scholars would put it being written as late as 205, 210AD, something like that, right into the second century. So we could be talking 80, 90 years, you know, three or four generations after the events it's recalling.

Whenever it was written, was is sure is that by the time it was written Christianity was becoming an institution; it was re-enacting the vents of the Last Supper in a ritualised way; and a sacramental understanding of what was going on was emerging. So when we hear "the bread that I give . . . is my flesh,"

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we're naïve if we think we're hearing a verbatim record of what Jesus said some afternoon or other. What we're hearing is how editors, three or four generations after Jesus lived, handled and shaped the material they received about the sort of stuff that Jesus said. And we're dead right to hear in it a reference to Holy Communion.

So the Bible tells us that Jesus feeds us - in just the same way God fed Moses and Elijah - through our ritual of Holy Communion. When Moses and Elijah were fed, it gave them spiritual succour, yes, but it also sustained them for their journey onwards into the wilderness. And in the same way, for us, Holy Communion is more than a spiritualised ritual. It's more than something that gives us a nice, warm, spiritual feeling.

In the old language of the Book of Common Prayer, we give thanks that having received Communion we have become "members incorporate in the mystical body" of

Jesus. So the dynamic of Communion is one that draws us into Jesus. But there's an opposite dynamic as well. Because what we're drawn into is the self-giving nature of Jesus. And the full words of Jesus are "the bread that I will give *for the life of the world* is my flesh. What we're incorporated into is service of the world Jesus came to save.

Church services are like a beating heart: we gather to be sent; we gather to be sent. Some traditions call this service the Mass. The history of the word Mass is all connected with the Latin for send away. The name of this service is "The service from which we are sent." We are sent - and equipped - to continue our pilgrimage through the wilderness. And Bridlington is a wilderness: a wilderness where there's homophobic vandalism; where vulnerable youngsters are radicalised by the far right; where families can't afford to feed their kids in the summer holidays without free school dinners; where the only place kids can go during the long days of the summer holidays in the

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hope of finding some welcome and hospitality is the
Priory Church . . . This is the wilderness we're sent to
serve. This is the service for which we're nourished.
This is the nourishment for which we come to church.

Amen.