

Normal?

In the week leading up to the opening of Churches for Private Prayer, non-essential shops were allowed to open, and people flocked and queued from the early hours to get in and start shopping, and similar scenes were witnessed as people rushed to beaches and beauty spots. On the Sunday of that week we opened for private prayer, there were no queues, there was no surge of people rushing up the drive with sun hats and picnic baskets to get in, and I suspect we were not the only ones to have opened our doors, and no rush ensued.

In our first reading from Isaiah, we find the people of Israel who have been in exile, returning, not from lockdown but from lock out. This return and Isaiah's comments are a reflection on what he saw taking place at this time of freedom, and it mirrors for me, much of what we have seen recently, people rushing out to spend money on that 'which is not bread', on things that 'do not satisfy', on things that remind them of 'normal'.

Isaiah's call is a call to return to normal, but not the normal that caused the overthrow of Israel into exile, but, to a more ancient normal of covenant as seen in the idealised world of David's reign. The call is to return to the covenant relationship with God, a God that time and again demonstrates profligate love for his people. A relationship that they had turned their backs on, and in turn the world and God, as they understood it, had turned its back on them.

This call of the prophet is of how to return. They are thirsty and hungry, so come drink and eat. Drink and eat refers to the basic requirements of bread and water, the unsexy ingredients that sustain us. But he also speaks of the superfluous, the extravagant, the luxury of wine and milk, and to 'come buy, but without money and without price'. What kind of giveaway superstore is the Prophet pointing to that just hands out such luxury goods? Of course, we know it is not a superstore but God our Father and Creator, of course we know it is a metaphor for the riches that we enjoy when in covenant relationship with God. We know this points to a promised land of milk and honey, a land of plenty. But it also points to an important truth. What is needed, the Prophet tells us, is not just economic recovery but a spiritual recovery, expressed in a committed relationship with God.

In the Church Times last week, The Bishop of Truro called for 'life after the pandemic... not return to the "normal" that existed before it struck. The temptation, (he said) was to believe that the past we came out of was "normal". It was not 'normal', (he states) that we should be living on this earth in a way that was increasingly unsustainable...' The Bishops hope is that of Isaiah's, that the events we are living through, like the events of an exiled people returning, is to, 'teach us to value things differently.' We have seen some revaluing in applauded frontline workers, but it needs to go further, with a profound shift in how we value the created world around us, both environment and people, as well as our relationship with God.

Our Gospel reading is a familiar one of the feeding of the 5000. Here in Matthew it comes after a series of narratives about the Kingdom of God. A Kingdom likened to a mustard seed, to yeast, to hidden treasure, to a pearl. All very ordinary things on the outside, but all with a capacity beyond the measure of the ordinary. That smallest of seeds becomes a plant, a tree, that can house nesting birds. A small amount of yeast can make a sack full of flour into bread. An ugly mollusc irritated by grit transforms it into something of extraordinary beauty. And ask any detectorist, a boring field can hold vast treasures.

And here in this episode we learn more of what this Kingdom is. Jesus had withdrawn to a deserted place in sorrow for the death of John the Baptist is followed by the people and rather than complain, Jesus had compassion and cured the sick and ministered to them all day. Perhaps out of compassion for Jesus the disciples urge him to send the people away to find food. In true Jesus style the disciples are asked to find a solution. For them the solution was beyond their comprehension and means, they only had the ordinary, the basics, 5 loaves and 2 fish. But here in ordinary, through Jesus we see the capacity beyond the measure of the ordinary, we see again the profligate love of God. We witness not only abundance of the Kingdom, but we witness the 'now' of the Kingdom. The Kingdom is shown not as a distant dream of the future, or some golden period of the past, it is of the moment, of now. In the sharing of the ordinary we witnessed the transformative nature of the love of God, not just with card carrying Jews but shared with all. 5000 men, besides women and children, and not just enough for the meal but there was excess. That is the Kingdom.

This is the truth for us today, the Kingdom is of now. The way ahead is not to go back to life as it was, it needs to be different, it needs to be transformative... The disciples offered their limited resources, and that was enough because they had, 'made a response' and Jesus took that response and the generosity of God was seen. We as Kingdom people know that all we can offer is the basics of bread and water, but in the offering we open ourselves to be agents of the generosity of God. All we can do is offer what we have to God through Christ, let go and let God! - Who needs normal?

Philip