

North Kildonan United Church

20th September 2020

"Bread of Heaven"

Exodus 16: 2-15

Philippians 1: 21-30

Matthew 20: 1-16

Gracious God, open our hearts and minds by the power of your Holy Spirit, that we may hear your Word with joy. Amen.

*Guide me, O thou great Jehovah,
pilgrim through this barren land.
I am weak, but thou art mighty,
hold me with thy powerful hand.
Bread of heaven, bread of heaven,
feed me till I want no more, feed me till I want no more.*

There are few hymns more descriptive of the experience of the Exodus than this wonderful Welsh hymn, written in 1745 by William Williams.

*Open now the crystal fountain,
whence the healing stream doth flow;
let the fire and cloudy pillar
lead me all my journey through.
Strong deliverer, strong deliverer,
be thou still my strength and shield,
be thou still my strength and shield.*

And the final verse:

*When I tread the verge of Jordan,
bid my anxious fears subside,
death of death, and hell's destruction,
land me safe on Canaan's side:
songs of praises, songs of praises
I will give to thee I will ever give to thee.*

In three verses Mr. Williams has encapsulated forty years of the Exodus, from the leading of the pillar of cloud by day and the pillar of fire at night, to today's reading of the bread from heaven in the wilderness, to the conclusion of the wanderings at the crossing of the Jordan River.

And in this hymn countless modern day pilgrims have found hope and encouragement and strength for their own journeys through life. It's a truly great hymn, holding pride of place in that wonderful collection of Welsh hymns that speak so clearly to the heart, mind and spirit. The text combined with the stirring notes of Cwm Rhondda, the tune usually used for this hymn, provides us with a full throated, thrilling musical experience. And we hope and pray and look forward to the time when we can join together in singing this and all the other great hymns of our musical tradition.

This hymn paints a particular picture of those forty years of wandering but our reading today offers us a less poetic, more realistic view. "*The whole congregation of the Israelites complained against Moses and Aaron in the wilderness. 'If only we had died in Egypt, when we sat by the fleshpots and ate our fill of bread; for you have brought us out into this wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger'".*

Now that the Israelites were on the other side of the Reed Sea, their freedom had begun. But freedom means little if you are starving. I think a lot of people have experienced a variation of that these past six months. Having a good bank account and a mortgage free home and perhaps a cottage doesn't mean all that much if fear of a virus is around us all the time and all the activities that gave our lives joy and meaning are no longer available to us. And to live with this fear without resources, without an income, without decent housing is even more terrible.

So, we read of a free yet starving Israelite population. For the people to believe that the God who overthrew the Egyptian soldiers, the God who led them from slavery to freedom was still with them, it was essential that their basic needs be met. How could they know and trust in this God if they were dying in the wilderness? Why worship such a heartless deity? Of course, worship was not on the minds of the Israelites-no it was the fleshpots they enjoyed by the Nile, it was the food and drink they once had in Egypt that has now become an overwhelming focus.

So God tests them by providing enough food for the day-give us this day our daily bread we still pray. Enough for the day, not excess so they can hoard it and feel they don't need God's providence. If anyone gathered more of the manna than they needed, by the next day this bread of heaven would become worm ridden and foul smelling. Just enough for the day, and on the sixth day, they will gather double the amount so that on the seventh day, as in the work of creation, God will rest and the people will rest and they will not have to gather food. Bread in the morning, quails in the evening. God satisfies the Israelites' hunger so that they can begin their new life with the right focus.

The Israelites are beginning a new way of life. A life of trust in the goodness of God. It will be God, not Pharaoh, who will provide for their needs. In Egypt they were forced to build great storehouses for Pharaoh's grain, and from that hoarding of resources Pharaoh determined how much the Israelites would eat.

Now life would be different. Instead of the enforced scarcity of Pharaoh's control, the people would work for themselves and experience the abundance of God's creation. Food was to share so that all would be satisfied, for food was the gift of a benevolent God, not the rationed tool of control by Pharaoh.

Life would now be different. The people would need to form themselves into a self-governing community that cared for everyone, that shared with everyone. It would be a community with structure and a rhythm to its days. Just as God rested on the Sabbath so too would the people enjoy a Sabbath rest one day in seven. Life is more than work and getting and accumulating even more. Work as you are able but realize there is more to life than work.

Food and warmth and security are essential to life, but there is more to life than just satisfying these needs. Once the Israelites were fed, then they could begin to imagine what their new life might be like, then they were able to begin to discover the fullness of faith in God, plan for a future of hope and care and joy. Now that they were free, they could create a community, a society. And that society was so vitally important for their life together.

During those years of wilderness wandering, God is creating a new people, a people inspired by a new vision of what life might be like. The oppressive ways of Egypt are to be left behind and abandoned. Those divisions of domination and submission, of some being rich while most are poor, a few having power and everyone else basically powerless. Those are the destructive ways of Egyptian slavery. God's new way is symbolized by the gift of manna, the plain, basic sustenance, the daily bread that is available to everyone, plenty enough for all but no one has too much.

Jesus knew well the Exodus story and no doubt his inclusion of "give us this day our daily bread" harkens back to the gift of food, the gift of manna.

We think too of the miracle of the feeding of the five thousand, where Jesus transforms a few loaves and a couple of fish into a manna event, where everyone has plenty and no one has too much.

Today's Gospel reading echoes the Exodus experience. Some workers were employed at the start of the day, others hired as the day went on, and still more employed

just before the job ended. Yet all received the same salary. And not all were happy about that. You can hear the rage in the voices of those who worked all day: "*These last worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat.*" A scandal by modern labour practices, but a vivid illustration of God's radical economy, where everyone has plenty and no one has too much. A parable of God's kingdom, where all are equal.

Dorothy Day, an American Catholic activist, wrote back in 1952: "*Jesus spoke of the living wage, not equal pay for equal work, in the parable of those who came at the first and the eleventh hour*". A living wage for everyone, where there is plenty for all, but not too much for just some people.

For the past six months, all of us here and everyone around the world have been wandering in a wilderness, a wilderness that doesn't seem to be ending anytime soon. It has been a painful, at times terrifying, wilderness experience, with much loss of life, great illness and punishing isolation. It has been a testing time for all institutions, organizations and enterprises, and we know that not all of these will survive. It has also changed the way we work and where we work, with so many now working at home and no longer going to an office or having a chat with fellow workers around the water cooler.

We are nowhere near the verge of Jordan and a post-COVID resumption of life. So much seems so different these days, so much seems to have changed and we are understandably fearful and worried. But as we look back on these past six months, I would hope that we might all have our stories of the help and kindness received from others and in turn offered to others, the friendly calls and emails wondering how we are doing, the support of family and friends in a multitude of ways, the opportunities to be generous and forgiving. If nothing else, this pandemic has taught us the importance of relationships and the need to stay interconnected with those we love and care about, as well as to be compassionate and caring to others.

It has also impressed upon us the need for hope. Hope that in time this pandemic will end. Hope that with God's faithfulness, we too will be led through this wilderness to a new land, perhaps a new way of living. The Israelites were profoundly changed by their years in the wilderness. It's too early to say how changed our society will be once masks are a thing of the past. But it's not too early to plan for a more just, more equitable future, and to seek a correction to the wrongs inflicted through prejudice, wrongs based solely on race, gender or lifestyle.

Until then, as we move through these days, as we live in this in-between time of what was and what will be, as Christian folk we trust in the ever-present grace of God to

comfort and guide us, and we stay hopeful that the love and peace of Christ will keep our hearts encouraged and strong.

And we take to our comfort this age old blessing, given to you and to those whom you love.

The Lord bless you and keep you,

The Lord make his face to shine upon you and be gracious unto you;

The Lord lift up the light of his countenance upon you

And give you peace, now and always.

Amen.