

## **Sunday 29<sup>th</sup> July. John 6: 1-21; Ephesians 3: 1-21.**

This month we have experienced some of the hottest temperatures in the UK since records began. Summer 2018 has been compared to the legendary summer of 1976 which a few of us here are old enough to remember. Stand pipes are being talked about once again and the nation is divided over whether we love it or hate it. Some of us are basking in the warmth and loving every second in the sun, others are struggling to cope and finding the heat exhausting and debilitating.

Whatever we think of it here in Dursley, the extreme weather has led to some truly shocking scenes across the globe. This week's terrible fires in Athens were particularly poignant for us as a family, knowing that Ruth was travelling through the region only a week before, and sunning herself on a beach not so far away from where many people have just been burned alive. Meanwhile there have been fires in Sweden and floods in Japan. A close friend of mine is flying to visit her parents in Kerala in India this weekend and has sent me pictures of the terrible flooding there in recent days and stories of tremendous loss of life.

Earlier we sang of the beauty of God's creation, but sometimes the beauty of our planet is double-edged. Sunshine and rain are both required to sustain life... but in extremes each can kill and destroy. How can we hold in tension such contrasting realities? How can we understand the contradictions of life and confront the challenges to find beauty in the horror of it all? Sometimes I think my head will explode when I consider the political tensions in our country, the arguments over Brexit, the millions of refugees displaced by violence and oppression, the power hungry world leaders, the imbalance of resources and the injustices across the globe. All I can see is the empty half of the glass.

Thankfully, our bible stories today shed some light and hope in to all this darkness. The passage which Peggy read to us from John gives us two different stories in which doubt and anxiety are overcome. The feeding of the five thousand is a story which occurs in all four gospels. In Matthew and Mark there are stories of a second, very similar miracle soon after the first where Jesus feeds another crowd of four thousand. All of these stories echo an account in 2 Kings 4 where the prophet Elisha feeds a crowd of 100 during a famine with 20 small barley loaves. In all these stories we are told of food left over.

John's account, which we heard today, tells of the doubts of Philip and his fears that they simply can't afford enough food to feed such a massive crowd. He estimates that it would cost them six month's wages and that even then the individuals would only receive 'a little'. Jesus knows of Philip's doubts – indeed he plays on them with his question, 'Where are we to buy bread for these people to eat?' even though we are told that he has already decided what he is planning to do. John describes the event as a 'sign' which the people recognised; an event which identified Jesus as 'the prophet'.

In three of the four gospel accounts of the feeding of five thousand, the story is immediately followed by an account of Jesus walking on water. John's version, as we heard today, describes Jesus walking across the storm-tossed Sea of Galilee to where the disciples are – right in the middle of the lake. John describes the distance that the boat had travelled very specifically as three or four miles – and the Sea of Galilee is about seven miles wide at the point being described – so there is no question that they are near the shore, and yet, as Jesus reaches them and calms their fears, they 'immediately' reach the land. Jesus's presence instantly alleviates their terror and brings them to safety.

John's version of these stories emphasises their miraculous nature and confirms Jesus' divinity. In the conversations the next day Jesus identifies himself as the Bread of Life – bread which goes beyond the manna provided for Moses and the wandering Israelites. Jesus himself is the one to calm all fear, satiate hunger and quench thirst; Jesus brings abundant life. The glass he offers is so full that it runs over.

Of course Philip and the other disciples struggle to comprehend. Philip is too busy worrying about their lack of cash and Jesus's question shows that he knows exactly that. How easy for us with the benefit of hindsight

to smile and pity Philip's lack of faith. The story is written in such a way to encourage us to do just that, and yet are we any better?

This week Simon delivered the first of his *Engaging With...* series, helping us to explore different people's attitudes to God and to engage with their arguments. He began by considering the views of Atheists who argue that there is no such thing as God, that God is a concept that we have invented to make ourselves feel better. Sadly, I wasn't able to be there on Tuesday (although I've read the notes), but I imagine that the stories I have just explored would leave your average Atheist in fits of laughter. Feeding 5000 people with a few bits of bread and fish? Walking on water? What sort of rubbish is this Bible of yours? We might not like their scorn but, if we are honest, how easy is it for us to accept the reality of these stories?

Well maybe it's a bit like the glass half-full and the glass half-empty arguments that we considered earlier. The glass is actually always full – full of water and air. How we see it depends on our perspective: Are we thirsty and grumpy that the glass doesn't contain more water? Are we not especially thirsty, and therefore quite happy with the amount of water in the glass? If we were in space, or sitting at the bottom of a swimming pool, and needing a vital breath of oxygen we might appreciate the apparently empty half of the glass a little better... but in our context, most of us don't even consider the air in the glass. At best, we take it completely for granted, at worst we don't really understand that it's there.

Arguing about whether these Bible stories really happened, about whether Jesus fed all those people in that way, or whether he actually walked on water, is a bit like arguing about how full the glass is. An Atheist who doesn't believe in divine power can no more see the truth of these stories than we can see the air in the glass. It takes a lot of faith a certain amount of wisdom and a lot of biblical study to get the point; the point is that God's abundance is there for all of us and that through Christ, and the power of the Spirit, there is light and love and hope in every circumstance.

Now of course this sermon is actually supposed to be part of a series about Ephesians. When we started our journey through Ephesians three weeks ago, Simon suggested that Paul probably wrote this letter in prison and that he intended it as a circular letter to lots of different churches in the region. There's quite a lot of argument about whether this letter was actually written by Paul, but what is evident is that it was a letter aiming to bring hope and encouragement to Gentile Christians at a time when they were being challenged and persecuted for their beliefs. Chapter One describes how we are adopted by Christ and how we obtain our inheritance of redemption – how we are gathered in and brought home by him. Chapter Two focuses on the household of God and how we are all members of that household, built together spiritually into a dwelling place for God on this earth.

As we turn to Chapter Three today we see Paul reminding us of his own personal revelation of the mystery of Christ. He explains how, in previous generations, the full detail of God's plan for the world was not made clear to humankind and the Gentiles were excluded from an understanding of it. The gospel – the good news – of this revelation however, is that through Christ we can all – Jews and Gentiles alike – share in the abundance, the boundless riches of divine love. The message of this letter is perhaps a more theoretical presentation of the stories from Galilee where we saw Jesus demonstrate this abundance in more literal and physical ways. Paul tells his readers that they, we, are now the vehicle through which the wisdom of God in all its rich variety is to be shared on earth. We are the ones who have to confront the earthly powers and challenge their limited understanding, to show them that the cup of God's love is not only full, it's running over.

We need to pause for a moment to think about the implications of that phrase Jews and Gentiles alike. It's too easy to just see it as meaning 'not just the Jews... but us too.' First of all, we need to remember that this revelation challenged the Jewish pre-occupation with family lines and inherited identity. By using the concept of adoption Paul explains how everyone can be part of God's family, he breaks apart the human

notion of 'us and them' which has always caused – and continues to cause – so much damage in our world. Christ's message, and Paul's, is one of inclusion – of abundance for ALL. We need to remember that, for us today in the Christian church, we have that same tendency to think that we – people who are like us - have a special understanding of God and that in order to be in a relationship with God people need to follow our traditions and rituals, think and behave as we do, sit in church on Sunday mornings and stand up and sit down in all the right places. Christ came to challenge and to change that sort of thinking. All means all.

And so we come to Paul's 'I pray...' from verse 16. Paul's prayer is that we might all have the power to understand the love of Christ, and be filled to the brim with the fullness of God, rooted and grounded in love. What an amazing prayer.

If my studies in Theology, Imagination and Culture taught me anything, they taught me that the Bible is full of contradictions and quite a few terrible stories of things which have been done in the name of God by the people of God. They taught me that it's possible to nit-pick through it, arguing about this or that expression and trying to pin down God in ways that suit us – often presenting God in ways that reflect our own weaknesses and failings far more than anything else. Paul – writing from prison - was very aware of the multiplicity of different beliefs and perspectives on God, and the persecution that could arise because of religious argument. His prayer here, on bended knee, identifies God as the creator of all things, and the being from whom every family in heaven and on earth takes its name. He prays that we might all understand the nature of God better and identifies that nature as one of love. When we try to interpret anything in the Bible, when we try to make sense of the world, when we try to understand the very nature of God we need to do it with a faith in Christ in our hearts, in the power of the Spirit, and through the lens of love - with the perspective of a cup that is full and running over with love. This love is described in terms of a breadth and length and height and depth; it is measured in every dimension and surpasses our limited human knowledge.

What a prayer! So what might that prayer mean for us here at Dursley Tab? Well first of all, I think it means that if we take Paul seriously we have a responsibility to try to grow in our understanding of the nature of God and our appreciation of how wide God's family really is. If God's love is for all, then God's community is not just the people who think like us, who belong to the Tab family, who fit in with our notion of what church should be. It includes the people who will never set foot in this church, who take no joy in singing hymns, who find our traditions and practices weird and uncomfortable. We need to help them to find a relationship with God and support them in developing that relationship in different contexts just as Jesus did.

Secondly, if God's nature is overflowing with love and we are trying to share that, then we need to be looking for the hidden light and hope in every situation, in every person we meet. We need to try to focus on the beauty of every situation and the positivity and the joy of it, rather than the ugliness and despair and negativity. That doesn't mean to say that we deny the pain and the misery and the despair, or that we trivialise it or belittle the attempts of people who can't seem to find their way out of the darkness. It simply means that we need to try our hardest to shine the light of love and hope in to the world.

I don't know about you, but I don't find that easy. There are times when it's easier to be with people I like – people who are like me. There are times when I want to wallow in the shadow, when I'm overwhelmed by the darkness, when I want to shout and storm about the glass being half empty... or drained to the dregs. When things are in a muddle and I can't see a way out, I have a tendency to respond like Philip in the face of 5,000 hungry people and think that we can never have the money... or the resources... or the energy to deal with this situation. What the gospel story demonstrates, what Paul prays for, is that we should understand the abundance of God's love and never feel metaphorically hungry or thirsty again.

This week I've had a tricky week and all sorts of things have hurled themselves at me, taken up my time, shaken my sense of purpose, changed my direction, challenged my ability to hope. When I sat down to write

this sermon, the words wouldn't come. Every thread of argument I tried to develop just unravelled. I read the passages over and over, but nothing made sense and I began to despair. I sat down to pray, I read some more, I laid down all the niggles and preoccupations that I was focusing on and I prayed Paul's prayer for myself. It may not be the best sermon I've ever written... but when I finally admitted all my weakness and my grumpiness and my negativity and said sorry to God and began to rest in God's abundant love, then things started to come together.

This autumn we are, as a church, beginning to review our purpose and try to discern God's will for our future in this town. We need to make an assessment for our Synod of our Ministry and Mission requirements and to re-establish our vision for the years ahead. For some of us there might be a temptation to just concentrate on a half full glass... think of the positives and skim over the problems. We have a full church, a fantastic minister, a busy calendar and a reputation for making a difference. Surely all will be well... we can leave it to Simon and the Elders...these are decisions for other people and not for us. For others the glass might seem more than half empty. At a time when Church nationally is in decline, when the URC is reducing the number of its ministers, when our own sister church at The Quarry is on the brink of collapse, when we at the Tab teeter on the edge of a financial deficit, when we're bogged down in the devilish detail of trying to keep the building safe and functional, trying to value everyone in our community appropriately, to reach out to the desperate need of those around us... it can be very hard to focus on the positives and to think about the abundance of God's love and how we might share it. It's tempting to be cynical and negative, and to think that engaging in such discussion is pointless.

What we need to be able to do is recognise that God's glass is always full, but that it contains different substances in tension and that we can never fully understand the divine mystery. If we hear Paul's prayer for us today, we should understand that we are the church, that we have a responsibility to grow in our understanding of God and share the rich variety of divine wisdom with those outside our walls. We need to embody the fullness of God's love and try to share its breadth and length and height and depth until it spills over in abundance and in to the world.

What does that look like in practical terms? Well there are three more of Simon's *Engaging With...* evenings where you will find opportunity to think more deeply about what it means to be Christian and how to engage appropriately with a range of different people who are not. Our August Tab News explains the process of the Vision 2030 review that we are about to undertake and how you can participate. The elders are asking that you make the time to sit down prayerfully over the summer and consider what God is saying to you about your role in this church and your vision for its future. Put aside your sense of self, let the threads of your ideas unravel and allow God to knit them together again. In September, make the time to complete the questionnaire that the elders have produced and respond honestly and with appropriate detail to the questions you find there. Make the date of the consultation on Oct 6th a priority and come and share in rooting and grounding the future of the Tab and all our local community in love.

Now to God, who by the power of the Holy Spirit at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine, to God be the glory as we seek to follow Christ Jesus and share his love forever and ever. Amen.