

Sermon for Sunday 8th August 2021 (Trinity 10) by Jane Brough

Gandalf the wizard, Elizabeth Bennet and Inspector Morse are all fictional characters who have been brought to life by actors on the stage, in films or television and radio productions. When we are reading, we often build up mental pictures of the people in the story. When we watch a dramatisation of the book we may be surprised, disappointed, or pleased by the way characters are depicted. The dramatisation may open up to us new ways of thinking about the whole story and shed a different light for us on relationships and interactions.

To a certain extent, of course, one person's interpretation of a fictional character is as valid as another and it can be exciting to see or hear different productions of books like *The Lord of the Rings*, *Pride and Prejudice* and the *Inspector Morse* novels.

The representation and interpretations of the life of a real person may not be quite so straightforward, if that person is, for example, Mozart, Oliver Cromwell or Florence Nightingale, we have to rely on contemporary descriptions, letters and other documents that build up a picture of that person's life, personality and relationships. And we usually have no way of knowing how close the dramatic portrayal of some historical figure is to the real person.

From their scriptures, the people of Israel have built up in their collective minds a picture of the one they call God's anointed one, the Messiah, who will come to set them free from tyranny and establish God's Kingdom of justice and peace, and they look out for signs that he may be coming soon.

Today's Gospel reading begins with the final verse from the last week's passage of John 6:35. The interaction between Jesus and the people is still being conducted in the aftermath of the miraculous feeding of the five thousand. Jesus declared that he was the bread of life, provided by God from heaven to bring them spiritual satisfaction. He had been sent to bring life to the world. But Jesus' listeners reject this picture of Jesus as the long-awaited prophet or anointed one of God. He cannot have come down from heaven, they say, because he's Joseph's son and they know all his family. He's just an ordinary human being like them.

This critical and disbelieving group have, without knowing it, stumbled upon the great mystery and the heart of John's Gospel, that the word which was with God in the beginning and through whom all things came into being has become flesh and lived among us. John tells us that when the word became flesh, whoever believed in him would be given power to become a child of God. And in today's reading we hear Jesus saying "I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats of this bread will live forever". Both the crowds of people following Jesus and those who are hostile towards him have pictures in their minds of God's anointed one which are getting in the way of them seeing the truth. They cannot see the reality of a God who comes alongside us as a human being and feed our spiritual hunger with the revelation of his all-embracing love.

The promise that Jesus held out to the Galileans is one that is held out to us today. It is a promise fulfilled in the Eucharist that we now celebrate. If there is one thing, we all share in this gathering, it is the same hunger. We hunger for a love that does not disappoint, we hunger for a word that does not fade away, we hunger for bread that does not fail to satisfy. In this Eucharist the love of a tender God is offered to us in the word and sacrament.

In this coming together, this local church, we are nourished by God's word and the bread of life. The words spoken are opened to us, the bread offered is broken for us to share.

This is not something we come to look at, like a still-life painting in an art gallery, rather it is something we come here to do. The Eucharist is a word that flows into deed, it is an action. It is the act of sharing in the bread of life, participating in the life of Jesus himself.

We continue to return here because we are hungry for God. Because the food that physically satisfies us is not enough for us. There will be times when we wish we were elsewhere, times when what happens here will leave us untouched, times when we will be distracted by a litany of worries that refuse to go away. No matter. Sometimes we have to be content with the act of faith that brings us here, a public admission of our need for God and the people of God. In coming here, we declare that we cannot fall back on our own resources, we need Jesus, the bread of life, to sustain us. Staying hungry for this bread means that we do indeed long for the food that endures the eternal life. Jesus is the living bread that came down from heaven to find us and to bring us and keep us in eternal life and we can only accept that gift with wonder and thanksgiving.

AMEN.