

## Address for 22 August 2021 by Nigel Guthrie

“This is the bread that came down from heaven, not like that which your ancestors ate, and they died. But the one who eats this bread will live for ever.”

Little did I know when I drew up the preaching rota that today would be just two days after my mother’s funeral. Dorothy died on 27<sup>th</sup> July after more than three years at The Dales Nursing Home in Howell Road where she was wonderfully cared for. We were due to go away three days later but we realized that if we cancelled our holiday we wouldn’t be able to rebook it this year due to school term times so we quickly made arrangements for her funeral and then went away for two weeks coming back last Sunday.

So we’ve had time to reflect on her long life and prepare for her funeral. But, as many of you will know, it is a moment of profound reflection when the person who gave birth to you lies still in a coffin before you. Dorothy wasn’t a young mother, indeed at 36 she was apparently described as an ‘elderly primate’ in the hospital! But she has been a constant presence in my life for the past 61 years. None of us, especially her, expected her to live to be nearly 97! So, we had her with us for longer than might reasonably have been expected. But that moment of final farewell still feels very significant, and is an inescapable reminder of our own mortality.

My father became ill with Parkinson’s Disease and a related dementia and Tina and I offered that we would support them if they wanted to. They moved to Crediton in 2007. My father was hospitalized soon afterwards and was then very well cared for at Barton Place for 18 months or so until his death. I remember that he appreciated joining in a communion service led by Maria Hearl when she was curate here!

My mother had some good years at Crediton, making friends and joining in church life, supported by us and latterly by carers coming into her home. But a few months after we moved to Exeter in 2018 she had a fall which led to a spell in hospital and it became clear that she wouldn’t be able to live at home any more. So, it was a blessing that a room came up at The Dales just up the road from us. The last 18 months have been a massive challenge for all our residential and nursing homes and my almost daily visits to her were drastically curtailed. Indeed, for many months we weren’t able to visit at all. And then visits were much more sparse, booked in advance, and accompanied by Covid tests and the wearing of protective gowns, masks and gloves.

My mother had been brought up as a Welsh Presbyterian but she always valued the communion service and church music, so she accommodated herself well to the church in Crediton. And in her final years at the Dales she asked that I should take communion in for her at Christmas and Easter.

I think for her it was part of her preparations for her death which she frequently anticipated. Indeed we became very used to her predictions that she wouldn't be here at the next birthday or new year – and to her confounding them for so long!

It was very moving to share Holy Communion with her propped up in her bed at The Dales. This sharing of the bread was undoubtedly a sign for her of God's love for her and of the promise of eternal life – “those who eat this bread will live forever”. Although she faced considerable difficulties of various sorts, she remained faithful to God throughout her life and valued this tangible sign of communion with God and with fellow Christians. She was certainly a good and faithful servant.

Today we have heard that some of Jesus' disciples deserted him. Jesus realized that others would find the challenge of following him to his death too much to bear. In today's gospel we hear him ask the disciples “Do you also wish to go away?”. But Simon Peter replies “Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and know that you are the Holy One of God”.

And perhaps, like Simon Peter, we feel *compelled* to believe because we have seen for ourselves the Truth revealed in the person of Jesus. So, in spite of our doubts, in spite of the failings of the church, in spite of the disasters that happen in the world, we choose to follow Jesus; the one who offers the love of God unconditionally to all who are willing to hear and receive. The sign of this unconditional love is the sacrifice which Jesus makes on the cross for us and for our salvation. And, Jesus left us the sacrament of holy communion that we would have a constant tangible reminder of his love for us, his sacrifice on the cross and his promise of eternal life ‘this is my body, given for you, do this in remembrance of me.’ We are reminded of all this every time we hear the words ‘the body of Christ keep you in eternal life.’

Today's gospel reading is the final one in a series from St John that we have in this second-year cycle of readings. Most of the readings in year B come from Mark's gospel – and we will be back with Mark next week. But because Mark is the shortest gospel significant passages of John's gospel are added into this year's readings. The ‘Bread of life’ discourse which follows John's account of the feeding of the five

thousand is the most extended of these and builds on the symbolism which is already inherent in that story. Jesus is seen as the new Moses come to feed his people. The bread in the story is a reminder of the manna which was given to the Hebrew people in the wilderness and which came to symbolise the word of God which always nourishes his people. And for St John, Jesus is The Word made flesh, who comes from the Father and gives himself for the life of the world. We are invited to become one with that life, to feed on it and to be part of it. Discovering how we do that is a significant part of our calling as Christians.

In his fabulous book 'The Meaning in the Miracles' Jeffery John quotes Saint Augustine's commentary on John and I would like to finish with that quotation:

'I am the living bread which comes down from heaven'. It is 'living' because it was Jesus who came down from heaven. The manna also came down from heaven, but the manna was only a shadow of the reality. Those who heard were terrified at this. It was too much for them, they thought it was impossible. But believers know they are the body of Christ, provided they do not neglect to *be* the body of Christ. One must *be* the body of Christ if one is to live by the Spirit of Christ. So whoever wants to live, must live as part of the body.

*Augustine of Hippo, Homilies on the Gospel of John 26: 13*