Travel back with me, if you will, to this city twenty-five years ago; to the University Church of St Mary the Virgin, early one Sunday morning. The streets are clean and empty, the sun shining crisply on Cotswold stone. As a pious young student, I had risen early that Sunday morning to go to the eight o’clock communion service. All was well with the world and – just a little bit pleased with myself at having got up so early – I, with the handful of other worshippers, had settled happily into the quiet rhythm of worship.

But just as we were approaching the distribution of communion, something utterly unexpected happened. In the distance we heard the heavy north door creak open. Then there was a strange noise – an alternating tapping and scraping – and with it the sound of heavy footsteps slowly entering the nave. The north door is out of sight of the chancel where we were sitting, so there was a long wait until the source of the footsteps became clear. Louder and louder they became, still accompanied by the scraping, until we saw, striding up the chancel steps, a powerfully built young African Caribbean man. Nothing so strange about that, you might say – except that he was wearing a full suit of armour, elaborately crafted and polished, and at his side hung a sword – it scraped the floor with a metallic rasp at each step. Purposeful and dignified, he walked up the aisle, knelt at the altar rail, received communion in both kinds, rose, bowed to the altar and left in the same manner in which he had arrived – tap, scrape, tap, scrape, tap, scrape…

Being Anglicans – and eight o’clock Anglicans at that – none of us commented on any of this, but it still ranks among the strangest things I’ve ever witnessed. In fact, when recounting the story, I sometimes wonder whether it can really have happened.

That bizarre episode was called to mind by the story we heard in today’s Old Testament reading: the account of Melchisedek, King of Salem’s, visit to Abram. Most of us aren’t very familiar with this part of the book of Genesis. But here in the middle of a rather dull
section of the book – an account mainly of obscure battles and genealogies – here in chapter fourteen we have this strange encounter between the patriarch Abram and the priest-king Melchisedek. After Abram’s victory over ‘Chedorlaomer and the kings who were with him’, Melchisedek goes out to meet him, feeding him with bread and wine and offering him a blessing. This king, Melchisedek, is a mystery. Just like the sword-carrying Knight at the University Church, Melchisedek strides into the Genesis story unannounced and leaves equally with no trace. He is, as the NT writer to the Hebrews says, ‘without father, without mother, without genealogy, having neither beginning nor end of life’. Nowhere else in the Old Testament is he referred to, apart from one brief reference in Psalm 110. And the fact that he has no given ancestry is particularly odd in the patriarchal world of Genesis, a world where lineage was of immense importance. In OT culture who your mum and dad were really mattered; but about Melchisedek’s parents we know nothing at all.

In the history of the Church there have been two main ways of dealing with the mysterious figure of Melchisedek. The first, the traditional one, has been to see him as a type or forerunner of Christ. That’s the line taken in the NT letter to the Hebrews, which makes much play of the theological resonances of his name. Literally ‘Melchisedek, King of Salem’ means ‘ruler of righteousness and king of peace’ and from there it isn’t a long step to see him as one of the supreme forerunners of Christ in the Old Testament.

The other way of interpreting Melchisedek is the modern one, which tries to place him in context. Biblical scholars now believe that Melchizedek was probably the first of the Canaanite kings. Abram, who had just triumphed over his local rivals, was the new regional powerbroker, and so it would have been a good diplomatic move for Melchizedek to get on the right side of him. That interpretation is politically plausible, certainly, but in fact there is no more evidence for it than for the rich theological tapestry that Hebrews weaves around Melchisedek.

In fact, in some ways, both of these interpretations are too easy. There are parts of the Bible – and this, I think, is one of them – that are inherently difficult; they resist our attempts to smooth them out. It is almost as if they are there to remind us that the scriptures witness to something that is, at root, beyond us – the mystery of God. However sophisticated our interpretation may become, a point is always reached where scholarship alone is not enough. Even ‘the foolishness of God is wiser than human wisdom’ and,
though much in the scriptures may make obvious sense, there are always going to be parts that leave us baffled.

And in that respect the scriptures are very much like our lives. Most of the time our lives make sense. They fall into a pattern. We progress rationally, knowing where we come from and where we’re going. But, just occasionally, events break in on us with an unexpected and overpowering force. At those moments, bizarre reality walks in on us, just as it did on me that morning in the University Church and just as it did when Melchisedek walked in on Abram three thousand or more years ago. Sometimes the intrusion of reality can be a cause of joy – for most of us falling in love is the best example. But it can shock too – diagnosis with a serious illness or being let down by those who are close to us.

Whatever form it takes, that – the intrusion of reality – is what we find again and again in the gospels. The scriptures are not, on the whole, a rational programme for human self-improvement and the Bible isn’t the sort of self-help manual that you find in the *Mind, Body, Spirit* section of the bookshop. What the Bible *is* is a witness to the awe-inspiring mystery of God’s self-giving love for the world: *God made man, God with us and for us and in us.* What the scriptures give us is the story of Jesus’s unexpected arrival in people’s lives, causing *sometimes delight, sometimes ridicule, sometimes incomprehension.*

But always, as in today’s great account of the wedding feast at Cana, Christ comes as one who alters people’s understanding of reality – ours today just as much as theirs then.

Melchisedek offers Abram gifts of bread and wine, so that they may eat in peace together. Whoever we believe Melchisedek to have been, there is no doubt that the role that *meal of peace between strangers* played in their lives is the same role that the Holy Communion plays in ours today. Holy Communion is the meal that turns strangers into friends; it is the heavenly banquet of the book of Revelation; it is the wedding feast at Cana; and, above all, it is the place where we may eat at peace with one another and with God.

When God gives, God gives without measure, unstintingly, effusively. At the wedding feast at Cana *gallons* of water were turned into wine: God in Christ gave not just enough, not even more than enough: ‘good measure, pressed down and shaken together, and running over’. May he do the same for his Church today.