



Christ Church Cathedral

OXFORD

2 August 2020: Sunday Worship

The Eighth Sunday after Trinity

Romans 9:1–5, Matthew 14:13–21

Canon Professor Carol Harrison, Lady Margaret Professor of Divinity

‘Heaven in Ordinary’

In the Eucharistic prayer of the Orthodox Liturgy of John Chrysostom the priest says the words: It is right and fitting to hymn you, to bless you, to praise you, to give you thanks, to worship you in every place of your dominion; for you are God, ineffable, incomprehensible, invisible, inconceivable, ever-existing, eternally the same; you and your only only-begotten Son and your Holy Spirit. You brought us out of non-existence into being...’

Today we heard the gospel account of the feeding of the 5000. How did you hear it? What are we to make of it? What are we to make of all the gospel miracles? This extraordinary event is the stuff of many sermons, which come up with all sorts of interpretations which manage to skirt around the seemingly miraculous contravention of the laws of nature, in order to draw a lesson or moral about generosity, the infectiousness of sharing, or whatever. There are indeed lessons to be drawn, and that is why Jesus performed the miracle (if we want to speak in that way), but I think that we need not be so afraid of the literal account or be so wary of the fact that miracles happen.

In fact, I’d like to suggest that there is nothing at all incredible in the fact that Jesus should effect such a miracle – he is after all God; the ‘ineffable, incomprehensible, invisible, inconceivable, ever-existing God, the Son, who brought us out of non-existence into being...’ as we heard at the beginning. The question then is not how the miracle happened – the God who created the world and brought us out of nothing into being, is more than capable of multiplying a few loaves and fishes to feed a hungry crowd – but why?

Why, having emptied himself, having come to us to be born as man, to live a human life, with human parents and friends; to eat, sleep, hunger and thirst as a human being, should the man Jesus then do something so extra-ordinary? The clue, I think, is in the word ‘extra-ordinary’.

What is ordinary? Birth, growth, death; the dying and rising of the grain; the turn of the seasons; the form of a snowflake; the exquisite craftsmanship of a bird's nest; the artistry of a honeycomb; music, poetry; love? Having enumerated just such a list in his poem on prayer, George Herbert concludes that prayer is 'heaven in ordinary'. The poet William Blake does the same in the well-known lines from his *Auguries of Innocence*, when he writes:

To see a World in a Grain of Sand
And a Heaven in a Wild Flower,
Hold Infinity in the palm of your hand
And Eternity in an hour.

Herbert and Blake both saw what we all too often fail to see: the awe-inspiring, overwhelming extra-ordinariness of the ordinary, everyday world. We take it for granted; we don't appreciate its wonder; we don't see in it, through it and transcending it, its ineffable, incomprehensible, invisible and inconceivable Creator.

Blake looked upon a wild flower and saw heaven. But when people looked upon the man Jesus they all too often saw only a man. They needed to be jolted out of their disbelief, to glimpse something of his eternal Godhead; to become aware that the God who became man is also the transcendent God; that the ordinary carpenter from Nazareth is also the Creator of the world. When Jesus appeared in the blinding light of his Godhead at the extra-ordinary moment of the Transfiguration, he was no other than the ordinary Jesus of Nazareth. And when the five loaves and two fishes were multiplied a thousand-fold, they were no other than the ordinary gifts which God has created, providentially sustains, and gives to us in every moment.

We have the wonders of God's creation, providence and sustaining grace with us always; what appear to us as miracles, such as the feeding of the 5000 – are no more than a wake-up call: a blinding light, an earthquake, a gusting wind and flames of fire, so that we can once again hear God's still, small voice, which speaks to us in everything that we encounter, every day.

We, fallen creatures, blind to our Creator and to his extra-ordinary, ordinary gifts, need to be jolted out of our unseeing, un-feeling, deafness, numbness and muteness in order that we might, as the prayer I quoted at the beginning puts it, 'hymn, bless, praise, give thanks and worship [to] God in all places of his dominion'. Amen.