Cucumbers, melons, leeks, onions and garlic

“We remember the fish we used to eat in Egypt for nothing, the cucumbers, melons, the leeks, the onions and the garlic”.

I think this may be the first sermon I have ever preached about cucumbers but more of that in a moment.

Four weeks ago, on 2nd September, I began a journey from this Cathedral Church, as many of you will know. After the 8 am service of Holy Communion, the Sub Dean and congregation prayed for me and those with me at the shrine of St. Frideswide. I set out on a prayer walk which took me to all 46 Anglican churches in the city of Oxford over the next 8 days.

It was a journey of 100,000 steps or more than 50 miles plus one memorable day travelling by narrowboat. My fitbit was delirious for the entire week. We prayed in each church with those who came – about 800 people across the whole journey. I left a mark in chalk on each church which is still visible on the door leading into the cloisters here. I can say with confidence that I have defaced more churches than anyone else in the city.

There were many good things in the journey. I learned again that bishops are tangential to ordinary parish life but very welcome when they come and visit. Both were good news. I appreciated silent prayer in still churches. There were many good conversations on the way. I’m not supposed to have favourites but I can now say with conviction which is my favourite font in the city of Oxford. Ask me at the door if you want to know. I have a small prize for the person who guesses correctly.

The journey had a central purpose. I wanted to pray in each church for God’s grace and for the renewal of a particular part of the ministry we share. I prayed in every place for God to renew that part of our common life which is about welcome and listening,
teaching and learning and accompanying new believers to baptism and confirmation. This is the ministry which the church in every age has called catechesis: helping to form the likeness of Christ in children and young people, in families, in adult enquires. My prayer is for that ministry to be central again in every church in this city and this diocese and across this nation.

It’s a ministry of great joy and wonder. It’s a ministry which renews the whole church in the likeness of Christ. It’s a ministry which has become submerged and sometimes forgotten in our own generation. It’s a ministry in which we need to recover confidence.

This cathedral has a vital part to play in this renewal and in this ministry. More than a thousand churches and chaplaincies and schools look to this cathedral as our mother church. Christ Church is unique among English Cathedrals, a place of learning and teaching and research in one of the great intellectual and cultural crossroads of the world. The very name Christ Church is still shaping the life of this diocese: our vision is to become a more Christ like Church for the sake of God’s world: more contemplative, more compassionate and more courageous. The name of our Cathedral is our vision for the Church in this diocese. As you pray here for the life of this diocese pray for this renewal of catechesis and for your part in this ministry.

I promised you cucumbers and cucumbers you shall have along with melons and leeks and onions and garlic.

Moses is leading the Israelites through the wilderness. Behind them is back breaking slavery in Egypt. Ahead of them is the promised land. But right now they are in the middle of the desert learning how to be the people of God. Or rather not learning how to be the people of God.

As they travel, God gives them each day their daily bread: manna from heaven. The manna appears on the ground each morning. The Israelites go out and gather enough for each day. Nothing can be hoarded or kept except on the Sabbath. The manna is a daily miracle – a reminder of God’s grace.

But the people long for more. They eat the food of heaven but they are bored and restless. They long to go back. They long for meat and fish and cucumbers and melons and leeks and onions and garlic. They long for what they do not have.

And of course in every generation they offer a lesson for God’s people as we too travel through this wilderness together. Behind us is slavery. Christ has set us free. Ahead of
us is the promised land: life eternal when all shall be well. Right now we are in the middle of the desert, learning how to be the people of God. This life is meant to be uncomfortable. It is not our destination.

Our Lord Jesus Christ has given us a prayer to say each day. It is a prayer for people travelling through the wilderness. At the very heart of the prayer is this petition: “Give us this day our daily bread”. That petition has its roots in this story in the Book of Numbers. We are not authorised to pray for cucumbers or melons or onions or garlic: for the foods of Egypt. We are to shape our lives around this prayer only: “Give us this day our daily bread” – our manna.

The generation in which we live needs this prayer more than any other which has lived before us. We are bombarded with advertising 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, 52 weeks of the year in our most personal space and every public place. The advertising is targeted and sophisticated beyond our understanding. It is designed with one aim in mind: to feed our discontent; to make us long for what we do not have; to spin us lies about what will make us happy; to ensnare us in the coils of Egypt.

The entire economy of the world depends on creating this insatiable thirst for more in as many of its citizens as possible. The end result is slavery to money and possessions and perpetual unhappiness. How can you resist it without an inner life, without a better song without a different story?

It is our calling as the Church of Christ to shape the inner life; to sing a better song, to tell that different story. And somewhere near the heart of it is to live and teach this life changing, simple prayer: “Give us this day our daily bread”.

Teach us to be content with just enough. For that is the only way to joy. Teach us to see heaven in the ordinary, to give thanks for small mercies, to cultivate simplicity, to shape our lives and our world in ways which are sustainable.

Help us to see that we are women and men made in the image of God. Cucumbers and melons and onions and garlic can never in the end satisfy our deepest longings. Nor can power or position or riches or fame.

All of this as Paul once said is to be reckoned as dross compared to the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus as Lord, Christ who says to us this day: “I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty”.

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Give us this day our daily bread. We come as the imperfect and forgiven people of God to gather around his table. We are here by God’s invitation. We come welcoming equally all those who would travel with us for God’s grace is for all people. We come as those journeying through the wilderness, unsure of our way.

We come hungry and thirsty for the bread of heaven. We come seeking manna for the journey. We come and kneel with empty hands, not presuming but simply trusting. We come to holy communion, to meet with our God, seeking strength for this part of our journey and food for this day.

And we come seeking to be the Church of Christ: contemplative, compassionate, courageous for the sake of God’s world. Amen.