

## Sermon St German's Cathedral, 4<sup>th</sup> August 2024

**Readings:** Ex 16: 2-4; 9-15 and Jn 6: 24-35

Do you just take life as it comes, or are you someone who asks big questions? Like many children, I was always asking the question “why?” – probably when I was told to do something I didn't want to do! There are all kinds of questions, and here are some of them:

- Yes/No questions – eg Did you go to the Coffee Morning on Friday?
- To discover information – eg how far is the Moon from the earth (ans: almost 400,000 km)
- who, what, when, where, why, and how questions – they help to get more specific answers and open up conversations
- A rhetorical question – one where the person who asks doesn't really expect an answer – just like my first statement just now: do you just take life as it comes, or are you someone who asks big questions? I hoped you'd be thinking about a response but I didn't expect everyone to actually speak out the answer.
- And even ridiculous questions. Just last night I was asked if I would accept £1m on the condition that, for the rest of my life, I'd be tailed by an indestructible snail?

It's healthy to ask questions, and some questions feel like really big ones. Our Old Testament reading begins with an implied question: Why have you brought us out into the desert to die? You'll remember that the Israelites had been slaves in Egypt for a very long time. Their lives were hard, their baby boys were being killed and at last Moses helped them escape. But within two months they'd had enough of freedom. They were tired, hungry and thirsty. The sense of adventure had passed and they were remembering the good things that they'd left behind. They were in a very negative frame of mind and thought they'd die in the wilderness. They didn't even have bread and water!

Assembled together, while Aaron the priest was speaking to them, they looked toward the desert, and there was the glory of the Lord appearing in the cloud. And God said: at twilight you will eat meat, and in the morning you will be filled with bread. Then you will know that I am the Lord your God.

And miraculously, that very evening, a huge flock of birds came, providing meat for all. And in the morning as the dew evaporated from the ground a strange white powdery substance covered the earth. They called it Manna. The Israelites gathered it, baked or boiled it, and found it was very like bread.

So out of despondency, hunger and thirst God first displayed his glorious presence and then provided food for all.

And that's an encouragement for us all. There are times when life is hard and we've lost the vision of a way forward. We are in need but resources are not at hand. At such times it is OK to question God. Maybe, like the Israelites, we too will look out across the desert of our lives and see the glory of God, and find that he is indeed able and willing to provide what we need.

Our New Testament passage builds on this theme. John 6 is a very long chapter and this is week 2 out of 5 where part of it forms our Gospel Reading. Last week had the well-known story of Jesus feeding the Five Thousand. The people had been so impressed at being fed that they were thinking of forcing Jesus to be their king. So at the end of the day He slipped away to be on his own and the disciples went home by boat.

The following day everyone traipsed back to where they had been fed – but neither Jesus nor his disciples were there. They went to look for him and found him at Capernaum. It seems that they were not content with the miraculous meal they'd shared the night before because they asked him, "What sign then will you give that we may see it and believe you? What will you do? Our ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness; as it is written: 'Moses gave them bread from heaven to eat.'

It must have been exasperating. All the time Jesus was pointing them to God. He wanted them to move on from just being concerned about their bodily needs and to think about their spiritual ones. He feeds 5,000 people with 5 loaves and 2 fish and still they want more proof of who he is. At least they ask the question: "What must we do to do the works God requires?" So there is some level of understanding. And it's a question we might ask today. When I look around I see evidence of amazing work that you have been doing for God. Some of it – like Alister's work on renewing our building, or Nigel's total life commitment to this place – the buildings, the gardens and our spiritual well-being – is obvious to all. The work of others is often hidden – caring for elderly parents or children or grandchildren, looking out for neighbours or people at work, enabling the refreshments to be served on Sundays, preparing the meals or serving at Big Table. And some of you are faithful in your prayers for the rest of us, our town and Island – and the wider world.

But it's interesting to hear Jesus's response: "The work of God is to believe in the one he has sent." And it is this that triggers the request for more signs and wonders. They needed to be sure that Jesus was indeed the Son of God. I sometimes think back to the shepherds who were invited to Bethlehem to see the baby Jesus. We have no idea if any of them lived to witness Jesus's ministry 30 years later. They had one profound sign – the vision of the angels and the baby they were directed to. For them the experience was life-changing.

We have a lot of evidence – the written accounts of Jesus’s life, teaching and miracles in the Bible; the inspiring lives and writings of Christians over the last 2,000 years; our own experiences of God – some of which we shared at our café church a month ago.

And we have the Eucharist – the thanksgiving – the sharing of bread and wine; the opportunity to remember Christ, his life, his death and his resurrection. For many of us it is weekly opportunity to be strengthened in our spiritual life which in turns strengthens our physical life. Jesus said: “It is my Father who gives you the true bread from heaven. For the bread of God is he who comes down from heaven and gives life to the world ... I am the bread of life. He who comes to me will never go hungry, and he who believes in me will never be thirsty.” This is the heart of our faith – the belief which is the work of God. It is this profound mystery that we will celebrate shortly.

We may still have all kinds of questions. And it’s good to keep on asking them. Jesus encouraged his disciples to "ask, and you will receive, seek, and you will find, knock and the door will be opened to you., for whoever asks receives, whoever seeks will find and whoever knocks will find the door opens” (Matt. 7:7-8). Jesus could not have been more clear in sharing the priority of asking questions and seeking. So whether you are just beginning to ask who Jesus is and what is his relevance today, or whether you are facing extremely challenging circumstances and are crying out in pain, along with the psalmist: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from saving me, so far from the words of my groaning?” (Ps 22:1). Keep asking. Be honest with God, and honest with yourself. Look across your desert to see His glory and experience his generosity. And as we share the bread and wine, remember that Christ has gone before us, has shown his love for us and continues to care for us.

Amen

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