

God with God's people in the wilderness

Bread of heaven

Unless you're on a low carb diet, bread – even now – is likely to be a key element in what most of us eat each day – we may have a huge range of choices – sourdough, multigrain, bagels, chapatti, - but harvesting grain, grinding wheat, milling flour, making dough, baking... these are still the essentials, the familiar processes - even if mass-produced and mechanised - The wheat harvested from the fields around us may well be heading that way not long from now... these are the processes the bread we offered this morning has been through...

Need

Today we are continuing our series of sermons on encounters with God... and we join God's people in the wilderness... In a dramatic fashion, God has enabled them to escape from slavery in Egypt on a path made through the waters of the Red Sea. Now they are out in the desert... one month into their (unbeknownst to them) multi-year journey ... and they are hungry... I guess the food that they brought with them has run out... they are not equipped to be survivalists or farmers... and so they complain... not unreasonably, you might say...

When they were enslaved people in Egypt God heard their cries – that's how the book of Exodus begins... and now God hears again... and once more God doesn't just hear, but also acts... God gives the mystery bread from heaven - which they call manna - this is a kind of pun... it sounds a bit like the Hebrew words for *What is it?* ... as well as quails... so, a good diet (I guess).

Here, in the wilderness, God's people encounter The God who **provides...** I wonder whether we can think of a time when God has provided for us when we really needed it... perhaps a friend... or an answer... or the means to live...

Enough...

I was having a conversation with some family members last weekend and we were sharing food-shaming moments... when your children look through your cupboards and point out the ancient *best before* dates ... there was lots of self-justification... we never use *cardamom* (substitute any random ingredient here) very often... surely stuff in tins/dried herbs don't actually go off.... *use by* we will observe, but *best before* is surely a guideline, not a rule...

Here in the wilderness, the manna (whatever that is) really does have a *use by date*... that's how it is... God gives food that no-one can hoard... that is *all* the people need... that is enough for the day...

I love how this idea is explored in the Talmud – the teachings of rabbis – why just enough for the day, one rabbi's students ask – and he gives 3 answers: this is a sign of God's goodness... the food is given daily so it's always fresh... so the people don't have to carry even more stuff with them... and to strengthen their connection with God... because... **Here in the wilderness God's people encounter the God who is gracious. Who gives what is enough... what is completely satisfying for everyone.**

We live in a time where there is huge inequality... some of us have much more than enough (and sometimes waste it) ... while so many others have much less... nowhere near enough. We live in a time that is marked by systems and processes that encourage us to take more than we need... whether that's those hard to avoid buy one get one free offers - or *carspreading* – the tendency of vehicles to get bigger and bigger...

This story prompts us to ask ourselves: how much is enough? Enough for our bodies.... Enough for our wellbeing but also the wellbeing of others, of wider society, of the planet... This story prompts us to think about sharing... to embody God's provision of food by feeding those near and far who are in need, precisely because we have been fed by God who is gracious....

Lastly, God's people encounter the *glory of God*.

You'd expect to encounter God's glory in the dramatic moments... at the high points – like that walk across dry land with walls of water either side (as it looks in the films) ... but it's kind of tucked away in this story... verse 10 *And as Aaron spoke to the whole congregation of the Israelites, they looked towards the wilderness, and the glory of the Lord appeared in the cloud.* As Aaron explains what's going to happen, the people simply turn and God is there... God's glory is there...

That's it... tantalisingly, the narrative doesn't tell us what it looks like, simply that it is seen. But there has been nothing like this sort of encounter with God up to this point for God's people. It is only once they are here, in the wilderness, with no resources of their own to rely on, that the people encounter God... I wonder, could there be a connection between wandering in the wilderness and being able to see God's glory?

And if there is, I wonder whether there is a wilderness we are wandering through now? And I wonder how we can recognise God's glory when we see it?

Soon today we will share bread and wine in Communion. I guess we all understand what happens in Holy Communion differently ... but however we think of it, one thing we know is this: God promises to meet us when we share bread and wine together.

So, when we begin that part of our service... as we share the peace: let's remember as we greet each other that we are meeting part of the body of Christ, who is the Bread of Heaven.... And as we share the bread, let's give thanks for Jesus' offering of himself so that we can be fed and nurtured.