

Wheatley United Reformed Church
Sunday 26 July 2015 – Year B
2 Sam. 11.1-15; Psalm 14; Eph. 3.14-21; John 6.1-21

One of the people I shall always be glad to have known when he spent a term my Oxford college was the American novelist Joseph Heller. Joe was an irreligious Jewish, Valerie, now his widow, is an Episcopalian from Brooklyn. We bonded first over an evening of impromptu Gilbert and Sullivan in the Master's Lodgings and never looked back after that. His most famous novel by a long chalk is *Catch 22*, which takes its name from a piece of bureaucratic US Airforce nonsense in the Second World War. You can only be discharged from combat duty if you are insane. But if you say 'I'm insane, so I can't fly this mission', that doesn't work, because no one in their right mind would want to fly a mission, so not wanting to do so means that you must be sane. 'Catch 22' has passed into the language to mean an impossible situation from which there is no escape. But Joseph Heller wrote other novels, and one of them is *God Knows*. It's a very funny, very raunchy, very Jewish retelling of the family life of King David, in which one of his wives, Bathsheba, now a fully formed Jewish mother, is constantly plotting to ensure that her son Solomon gets to succeed his father, rather than any of his siblings by other women.

The biblical account of how David spots Bathsheba sunbathing on her roof as he looks across the valley from his palace rings all too true. Powerful people are used to getting what they want: they can, so they do. The rules by which you and I have to live don't seem to apply to them, and all too often they get away with it. Abuse of power is as old as human history, whether it's corruption, sex or silencing opponents. The cycle of stories about the court of king David includes seduction, rape, incest and murder, well beyond anything the gutter press may discover about our own royal family. It would make a brilliant soap opera; I'm surprised no one has thought of it. The stories are so believable because they deal with the human frailties of the great and powerful and their dysfunctional families, which we love to hear about. When David discovers Bathsheba is pregnant as a result of their encounter, his first thought is to get her husband to sleep with her as soon as possible. But Uriah, who isn't Jewish but a Hittite, from modern Turkey, is on guard duty outside the king's

chambers and refuses to leave his post. So David hits on a more drastic solution to his dilemma – he tells his military chief to send Uriah to the front line in the next battle, and Uriah is duly killed. David breathes a sigh of relief. No one will ever know that the child is his. Or so he thinks.

But the Bible contains other stories which are harder to read in the same way. Did Jesus really feed five thousand people with a few loaves of bread and a couple of fish? Did he actually have the power to walk on water? Are Christians required to believe in things which go against the order of nature, even when performed by God incarnate? God can do as he wills; but there's something of a Catch 22 here. On the one hand, Jesus appears to have rejected performing miracles when he was tempted in the wilderness and doesn't seem to have wanted to draw people to him by acts of supernatural power. Right at the end, he doesn't, for example, do as the scoffers propose: 'if you are the Son of God, come down from the Cross'. Would people have believed in him more if he had? On the other hand, the Gospels contain many accounts of miracles which make people wonder who he is or lead them to believe in him. We can suggest logical explanations or rationalizations, such as the mindset of a pre-scientific age, but for many people, churchgoers included, the miracles are problematic as a means to faith, not only because they set up a tension with how we know the laws of nature work, but because they seem at odds with the Jesus who has already refused to use them in order to attract followers. Maybe the writer of John sensed the same discomfort, since he never mentions miracles, only signs. We can't ignore the miraculous healings or acts, because they are there; but perhaps we should pay more attention to the clues the Gospel writers give us in their accounts, clues which suggest that the meaning lies deeper, beneath the surface.

The only miracle or sign which all four Gospels record is the feeding of the five thousand, which means it must have been of particular significance to them. Three of them follow it with Jesus walking on the water. The differences between the accounts are relatively small. John gives three details not found in the others: the Passover is near; the bread and fish arrived courtesy of a young lad; and the effect of the miracle made Jesus so wildly popular that the crowds wanted to make him king there and then, which would have been an act of open rebellion against the Roman occupation. The

presence of the boy provides a nice human touch, while the crowd's reaction reminds us of the dangerous political context of the ministry of Jesus. But the curious thing is that the real miracle, the element the Gospel writers really want to stress, is not the feeding of so many with so little, but the fact that much more food was gathered up at the end than had been originally provided. All the Gospels likewise hint that this miraculous meal is connected to older stories. The closest one comes in 2 Kings 4, where the prophet Elisha feeds a hundred people with twenty barley loaves and some is left over. Jesus, we may deduce, is a far more significant figure than the great prophet of old, since he trumps that performance many times over. Then there's the manna which fed the children of Israel in Sinai when they were hungry and lost. But John's reference to the Passover is more pointed, because the Passover commemorates the night the children of Israel left slavery for freedom, and he will have Jesus die at the moment when the Passover lambs are being slain; already in the first chapter Jesus is hailed as the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. Perhaps most significantly of all, though, John goes on to have Jesus in dialogue with the crowd to make it very clear that neither the manna nor the miraculous feeding are anything more than a pointer to a much more fundamental human need, for the true bread which sustains the human spirit, the bread which does not perish, the bread which gives eternal life and of which there is always more – which, he tells his listeners, will be found in his own self-sacrifice.

The Exodus, Elisha, the Last Supper, the Cross and Resurrection – they are all here in this one sign of a shared meal, and it looks forward to the Christian sacrament of bread and wine, which gathers up all these meanings and more. But it's all very well doing the detective work. What might it signify for us? About a month ago I went to a reunion lunch at my undergraduate college, Trinity, for those of us who had come up to Oxford fifty or more years ago. Next to me sat a man who had gone on to be a maths teacher, and who in retirement had become a street pastor in leafy south-west London. You might think there wasn't much need for that in such a prosperous part of the world. He told me about the fascinating conversations he'd had with people late at night and one story stuck in my mind. He'd got talking to a young man who was earning hundreds of thousands if not millions of pounds a year working in the

financial sector. ‘You must be very happy to have no financial worries’, he said. ‘True’, the young man replied’, pointing to the railway line below, ‘But every night when I come back from work I wonder why I don’t throw myself off that bridge’. It sounded like a parable of our times. The young man has everything most people dream of, and more; yet his life was empty. I could almost hear Isaiah recasting his words in chapter 55 of his prophecy: ‘Why earn so much money and not be satisfied? Why amass wealth and find you are dead within?’ We know there is real physical hunger in many parts of the world; here too, as our food banks show. That is an injustice which must be tackled. But in our society and across the Western world there is a real spiritual hunger, a longing for meaning and purpose to life, which drugs or sex or money or anything else people try in their prodigal quest for fulfillment can never buy. And our mostly empty churches waste their energies in matters of secondary importance, like same-sex marriage or women bishops, and forget what they are there for: to invite people who are hungry for treasures which do not rust and bread which does not perish, to invite them to come home, be rooted and grounded in Christ, and begin to live.

The story of David and Bathsheba also has a deeper sense than mere lust and the abuse of power. David’s greed has consequences; the child dies and David has to learn the hard way that he has sinned grievously. You remember the moment when Nathan the prophet comes to him with a tale about a rich man who stole a poor man’s lamb and David is consumed with anger, swearing that the rich man should die for his crime. Nathan turns to the king with the devastating words: ‘You are the man’. Because David repents, his own life is spared, and Bathsheba will have another son, Solomon, whose kingdom will have its moment of glory before he too puts personal pleasures before his duty as a servant of the Lord. There’s a pattern here, repeated in the reign of Ahab, when Jezebel persuades him annex Naboth’s vineyard to his already great estate. I can’t help thinking of that when I look at the Israeli settlements on occupied territory in the West Bank and wonder why it is, when the Scriptures are so clear, that we still do not learn.

Are we condemned, then, to live out our days in a world marked by the abuse of power or in a society which overdoses on material pleasures and cannot even

recognize the symptoms when the spirit starves? In his prayer in Ephesians 3 Paul offers a very different vision of our humanity. He is writing from prison, confined within four walls; but he has broken out of another prison, of the mind, as a Jew who has received the revelation that Gentiles are not unclean aliens but fellow-heirs with his own people of God's self-giving in Christ. His body may be in chains, but his spirit soars, as he sets out his vision of Christ at work in the cosmos, filling the universe itself. That same Christ is also at work in the lives of individuals, reshaping and rebuilding them on the foundation of his love. We are being rooted and grounded in love, he writes: notice the tense, 'being rooted', for this is a process yet to reach its end. Nor is this any old love, but the kind of loving which Jesus embodies, in life and in death: a love which addresses the real needs of individuals; which brings the lost safely home; which is not afraid to pass judgment on all forms of injustice, but which brings new beginnings to those who respond to its touch. This is a love which never abuses power, only inspires and attracts; one which is strong and purposeful enough to fill the aching void in the human heart. God does not require our every doubt to be silenced or condemn our every failure. If Christ dwells in our hearts through faith – that is, if we make a conscious decision to let his way become our way – then, Paul says, as we come to know his love which surpasses knowledge, we shall be filled with all the fullness of God. So here's the thing. Don't worry too much about doctrines or miracles. There's only one doctrine and one miracle that really matters, to put down your roots in the love of Christ and let them be nourished there. The soil is rich with mercy and grace and he brings with him all the sunshine, rain and warmth for growth towards God and an increase of love for others. Powerless in his death, he is the bringer of life. You don't have to be strong in virtue or have an unshakeable faith, for, miracle upon miracle, his power is made perfect in our weakness. You only need to hunger and thirst for righteousness, be poor in spirit, love mercy and peace, and he will feed you with the bread of life. Not only that: when you have eaten and are satisfied, there will be plenty more to give away.