

Trinity 9 2021

Amidst all the gloom of the pandemic there was a good piece of news last month. A tape of a previously unbroadcasted episode of the Morecombe and Wise show has been discovered. It finally went out last week, presented in snippets with various celebrity fans and the surviving members of the comedians' families offering reflections and reminiscences.

The programme also included some classic sketches, and we were able to enjoy again those memorable lines spoken by Eric Morecombe to the conductor Andre Previn on being taken to task for his performance of the opening bars of Grieg's piano concerto. 'You're playing all the wrong notes!' Previn complained; in response Morecombe picked the conductor up by the lapels and said, 'I am playing all the right notes – but not necessarily....in the right order.'

As we come to look at this Sunday's Gospel reading it may help us to keep those words in mind. There is a lot of good stuff here – but it doesn't all appear to be in the right order. The conversation doesn't flow easily; Jesus appears to answer questions that aren't asked until later in the passage, and it's not altogether clear where it is going. The discourse goes on for another 36 verses after the end of our Gospel' and it's perhaps not surprising that by verse 60 John tells us,

When many of his disciples heard it, they said, "This teaching is difficult; who can accept it?"

Many biblical scholars think that this long section of John's Gospel has been edited and re-edited and that some cut and paste errors have crept in. If this is the case it explains the clunkiness of the finished product, but it also tells us that this was a vitally important part of the Gospel, returned to again and again by the scribes and editors who wanted to get over the gist of Jesus' teaching as faithfully as possible.

This morning I'm going to spare us the task of trying to -as it were -re-arrange the notes into the right order and instead concentrate on two of the high points. But first, some context.

Earlier in this very long chapter Jesus had fed a large multitude from two fishes and five loaves given to him by a young boy. This has all happened near the city of Tiberias on the western side of Lake Galilee. The people are so astonished at this miracle that they try to make him their king, but Jesus will have none of that and he goes off to hide in a nearby mountain. Meanwhile his disciples decide to go home. They get into their boat and they row north-east to the lake-side town of Capernaum, where Peter had a house, which was probably the base camp for Jesus' Galilean ministry. While they are still on the lake Jesus comes to them, walking on the water, and they travel on together. Die-hards from the crowds are still waiting for Jesus to come down the mountain; they know he can't have gone to Capernaum because the only boat he could have taken is still there. Our Gospel reading begins at the point these folk decide to follow the disciples to Capernaum, hitching a ride on some passing boats. They are gob-smacked to find Jesus already there; and they ask him when he arrived.

The first high point I want us to examine more closely is Jesus' answer – or non-answer to their question in v.26:

"Very truly, I tell you, you are looking for me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate your fill of the loaves.

They have asked him a question about his paranormal activity; they want to know how he does his tricks, because surely a person who can do miraculous signs and wonders must have enormous power, and maybe they might get a piece of it. But Jesus sidesteps the issue of signs and wonders and he turns their question around, making a deeply insightful

observation about their true motives for seeking him out. It is not a desire for power, as they think, but something deeper; it is hunger for life

John's Gospel constantly talks about life. In John Chapter 1, read every Christmas, we hear that

In him was life; and the life was the light of men.

In Chapter 10 Jesus says,

I have come so that they may have life and have it to the full.

It wasn't Jesus' conjuring up something out of almost nothing that drew them to him, it was the fact that this meal satisfied them in a way no other could. Here they had experienced a taste of life in all its fullness.

These people don't yet fully understand what it is they are seeking; they are simply responding to their own hunger – exactly as the prodigal son did when he turned homewards at the thought of his father's good bread. But Jesus is now inviting them to go deeper, to go beyond signs and wonders, to go beyond the physical satisfaction of a full belly, and to live.

Two chapters earlier he has done exactly the same thing with the Samaritan woman at the well. She is thirsty for something but until she meets Jesus and he talks to her about her past life and her inner motives she doesn't realise that she is thirsty for life in all its fullness – that is Eternal life. You may recall Jesus says to her:

"Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, but those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life."

But what is this life? What does it look like? I would say that it is hard to describe and in the other Gospels Jesus repeatedly resorts to parables to communicate its nature. But I'll have a go. I think it's a life with a purpose that goes beyond health, wealth, and happiness; it's a life with inexhaustible depth and meaning; it's a life where everything is interconnected, where you are tuned into the rhythms of nature and even the most mundane tasks can bring joy; where all that you and craft and create is a form of praise; where suffering can be seen, faced, and even transcended because a greater perspective is brought to bear; where you feels worth something, dignified, and cherished. Above all a life through which love is gratefully received and lavishly given, a love that is stronger than death.

A few years ago I met a wonderful woman called Denise Inge. I was just a little jealous of her; she had written more learned and cultured books than I ever could; she lived in a Cathedral close; she was slender, blonde, elegant and somewhat younger than I. Most annoyingly of all she was humble, funny, and nice. Shortly afterwards she was diagnosed with an aggressive form of cancer and she died in 2014 aged just 51. This is one of the last things she wrote:

“Contemplating mortality is not about being prepared to die, it is about being prepared to live. And that is what I am doing now, more freely and more fully than I have since childhood. The cancer has not made life more precious – that would make it seem like something fragile to lock away in the cupboard. No, it has made it more delicious.”

More delicious.

But where do we find this delicious life? The answer is in the second high point of this passage, v. 35. Somehow, in way we don't understand, its is to be found in the words, the life, the death, above all in the person of Jesus of Nazareth:

Jesus said to them, "I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.

Sometimes I find it hard to be a Christian, hard to keep on keeping on when I see the challenges we face as a society and as a church, dwindling congregations, diminishing resources, the end of Christendom and the rise of secularism, abuse and corruption in our church hierarchy, climate change, war, terrorism, famine. When I feel like that I return to John Chapter 6 and the perplexity of those faced with the right words in the wrong order:

Because of this many of his disciples turned back and no longer went about with him. So Jesus asked the twelve, "Do you also wish to go away?" Simon Peter answered him, "Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life.