Exodus 16: 2-4, 9-15; Ephesians 4: 1-16; John 6: 24-35

**May I speak in the name of God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen**

Of the three readings this morning, two seem to be broadly on the subject of food and being fed and the third, if I were to sum it up, might be along the lines of ‘God has given to us; what are we going to give to God?’

1400 years before the time of Jesus, the Israelites were migrants, displaced people in a desert. And they whinged to Moses about how they would rather have died than be wandering round starving as they were now doing. The story goes on to tell us that God gave them manna to eat – wafers that dropped down like dew every morning. But the Israelites didn’t like manna much and kept complaining that it didn’t taste as good as Egyptian food, which they had enjoyed during their years in exile. But nevertheless the manna kept them fed and nourished for a generation. And quails – but little more is said about the quails. Either way, they got protein and carbs to keep them going, but they really weren’t terribly grateful. First mistake. Lack of thanks to God for his blessings.

And then the gospel this morning, from John 6, shows us Jesus saying that he is like manna, the bread from heaven that kept those ungrateful Israelites fed.

There are connections between the two passages, I think. The people were not satisfied: they complained in the desert, and they’re complaining again in John. And Jesus is a bit grumpy with them: you aren’t seeking me out because you recognise that I am the anointed one, but only because I fed the 5000 and you want me to do it again….. And he points them, as he always did, to God rather than the things of this world, namely eating, drinking and making merry. Whoever eats this bread, he says, will live forever. Knowing that you have been deeply loved from the very beginning, that you are forgiven, that you are safe in God’s love, that there is a purpose to your life and a community and a chance to change the world – knowing all these things, really knowing them, is the most satisfying thing in the entire universe.

I was reminded the other day, in conversation with a perspicacious person, of an ex-colleague – someone you all don’t know – who was prone to lashing out verbally and who could diminish people at a stroke. It called to mind that phrase about how hurt people hurt people: a wounded person needs to wound others and an insecure person feels better if he or she makes others feel insecure too. But the other side of that coin is that deeply satisfied, loved, forgiven and secure people love people and forgive people.

What else? Communion, the Eucharist, Mass – it doesn’t matter what we call it – but when we look at a communion wafer, it’s easy to think of manna, which must have looked much the same. There was one old gentleman with dementia at a residential home I used to visit regularly when I was a curate, who joined us in the lounge for the communion service and nodded off somewhere between the Bible reading and the communion bit, and woke up to discover I was onto the distribution of the wine, which he took, but then told me in no uncertain terms that he hadn’t had his little biscuit yet. He got it of course.

And that communion is a strange thing to do: indeed the early Christians were so clear that they were taking Jesus into themselves at communion that their enemies called them cannibals. But Jesus prods us into deep thought, and shocks us out of complacency by saying: I want to be so deeply within you, at such a deep level in your life that only the concepts of drinking my blood and breathing my Spirit and eating my flesh adequately express my desire to be part of you.

If we treat this communion casually, we leave it unsatisfied. And God wants us to be satisfied and nourished by the knowledge of the truth that his Son died, willingly gave his life, so that the world might truly live. So then, how do we demonstrate that we take our communion seriously and that it means something important to us? That might be found in the epistle from Ephesians:

Paul is writing to the people of Ephesus from his prison cell, and he wants them to understand how they ought to behave as followers of Christ. More than that, really, as people **called** by God. Not just choosing to agree with the basic tenets of faith, but being prepared to live out those beliefs in the world – much as Paul was doing by being a thorn in the flesh of the authorities and ending up periodically in prison.

So he tells them to be humble and gentle and patient and peaceful with one another. But also more than that: to be acutely aware that each one of us has been given gifts by God. Not all the same gifts, but deliberately different ones – gifts that fit us for different roles: some have skills in administration and organisation that I can never hope to match (and for which I am deeply grateful); some have gifts of patience in teaching; or encouraging others to work as a team; or creativity in music or flowers; or perseverance in the sort of ongoing physical graft without which these buildings and grounds would soon deteriorate; or in building a sense of community and hospitality……..or any number of other areas in which we might be gifted.

And that work, says Paul, is never complete ‘until all of us come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ’. And then he gets tough. Much as I complain about Paul’s writings – he was indubitably a bossy little man – he sets out an irrefutable argument for Christians everywhere: that we must say it as it is. To ourselves and to each other. And that is that we are not children. And therefore as adults we have to take full responsibility for our thoughts and actions. And that means playing a full and proper part in our membership of Christ’s body.

Christ has no hands on earth but ours. No feet but ours. Ours are the eyes through which he looks compassion on this world. Christ has no body now on earth but us. It is our job to be a blessing to the world.

There’s a popular view of religion: that we are all at the bottom of a mountain, and God is at the top, and all we have to do is fasten our crampons and get climbing all the way to the summit. The trouble is that Christianity isn’t like that at all. Christian faith is more like: yes, God is sort of at the top of the mountain, and we are sort of at the bottom, all kitted out and ready to climb, but then we feel a tap on the shoulder. And there’s Jesus standing behind us, saying: actually it’s OK – you don’t have that really hard climb up to God, because I’ve come down to you instead.

In the words of the famous hymn: Bread of heaven, bread of heaven, feed me, now and evermore. **Amen**