

A QUESTION OF ORIGINS

or

THE TUG OF GOD

1 Kings 19. 4-8

Ephesians 4. 25-5. 2

John 6. 35, 41-51

I speak to you † in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.
Amen.

In our gospel reading last week, we heard Jesus declare to the crowd that had followed him to the other side of the Sea of Galilee that he is the Bread of Life; and this is where our gospel text begins today. As the crowd hears these words, suddenly, a specific group emerges from within the crowd. We do not know how many they are; but we are told *who* they are. They are Jews, and the Jews start to murmur amongst themselves. Their murmuring is not without purpose; it is hostile,¹ and the Jews begin to challenge our Lord's claim. They say, 'Is this not Jesus, the son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know? How can he now say, "I have come down from heaven"?' (6. 41-42).

The theme of this part of Jesus' discourse has now been identified. Our Lord has made claims about himself that can only be understood in terms of his *origins*, that is, the fact that he descended from his Father above. His opponents the Jews will not even consider such a possibility; because they know his *father Joseph*. Jesus reproaches those who murmur by pointing to his heavenly Father, and by explaining his role in terms of his *origins* with the Father. The Father sends Jesus, the Father draws believers to Jesus, and the response of those drawn to his Son will determine the measure of their everlasting life. And it is our Lord who will raise believers up on the last day (6. 44).

¹ In this, the Jews' behaviour recalled that of the Israelites in the wilderness (cf. Ex 15. 25, 16. 2; 17. 3).

Isaiah, the prophet, had written that God would teach all of his children;² and our Lord then asks the Jews to listen to God, so that they too might be instructed. Initially, God taught Israel through the gift of the Law, but Jesus claims that all who have truly learned from God will come to him (6. 45). The instruction that God gives to everyone (and not just the Jews) will draw them to our Lord.

Jesus, who comes from God, has the unique authority to make God known. Because this is the case, the one who believes in the revelation of Jesus, the true bread who has come down from heaven, has eternal life (6. 47). As we saw last week, it is no longer that Law that produces life. Our Lord, the true bread from heaven, comes to make the Father known; and in doing so, he surpasses the former gift of manna, or bread, that was provided to the Israelites in the wilderness.³ Jesus is the bread of life.

The ‘murmuring’, hostile reaction of the Jews to our Lord is a lesson for us today. Often, the great mystery of God’s gift of himself to us is lost because of our attitudes and prejudices. God has always worked through his creation and has come to us time and time again through sometimes extraordinary, or ordinary circumstances; but we often fail to see it because of our inner attitudes, or because of our distractedness. We all know people who are constantly looking for another miracle from God, when God is already offering such a miracle – in the form of himself – to us.

The Jews did not see that our Lord could be anyone special, and certainly thought that he could not be the Son of God, or the ‘Bread of Life’, because they knew his earthly parents and where he lived. They refused to look beyond the obvious. Jesus tells them stop complaining and grumbling. In the time of Moses, the Israelites had grumbled against him, and therefore against God;⁴ and it was believed that such grumbling prevented them from entering the Promised Land. How often we miss

² Cf. Is 54. 13.

³ Cf. Ex 16. 15.

⁴ Cf. Ex 15. 24; 16. 2; 1 Cor 10. 10.

out on the mystery and wonder of God's gifts (and I use the plural form of 'gifts' on purpose) through our attitude of complaining and dissatisfaction. Our dissatisfaction, often expressed by analysis and debate, can prevent us from recognising the gift of God: the gift of himself, and the gift of his love and call upon our lives.

As we bring our thoughts to a close this morning, I would like to draw your attention to verse 44 of our text, where our Lord says, 'No one can come to me, unless drawn by the Father who sent me'. The word which is used for 'drawn' is actually a translation of the Hebrew in Jeremiah 31, where it is written, 'with loving kindness I have drawn you' (KJV). The word implies the 'tugging' of God, a God who reaches out to his world, and who reaches out to us. But we will all agree that the word 'tugging' also suggests some resistance. Elsewhere in the Scriptures, this same word is used to describe the tugging of a heavy net to shore.⁵ God is continually 'tugging' us in love, but in spite of his 'tugging', some of us resist him. Everyone doesn't respond warmly to the 'tugging' of God.

In our Old Testament reading we saw that Elijah, who was fleeing for his life from Jezebel, the idol-worshipping wife of King Ahab, had come to the end of his rope. He had been zealous for God, and had attempted to stop the worship of idols that had crept into the practices of God's people. But now Elijah's own life is threatened; and he has neither the courage nor the strength to continue. He resists continuing in his work for God, and asks simply that God will allow him to die. What does God do for Elijah? He provides food and water for him, so that he can continue in his mission and ministry. In spite of Elijah's resistance, God drew him to himself; he provided for him in love; and in the end Elijah went on in new strength.⁶

⁵ Cf. Jn 21. 6, 11.

⁶ Cf. 1 Kgs 19. 8.

Today, may you and I recognise those moments when our God is drawing us to him; those circumstances in which he is ‘tugging’ us because he wants to show us more of himself and his love.

† Amen.