

Lent Compline Talks 2016

St Mary's Kidlington
Sunday 21st February
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The Eucharist God feeds us: in the Old Testament

This evening I want to look at 3 very different sections: first and leading directly on from the Passover which enabled the Israelites to escape slavery in Egypt, the manna in the wilderness; second, jumping forward to Elijah fleeing from the wrath of King Ahab; in the book of Kings and finally Belshazzar's feast in the book of Daniel.

After the destruction of Pharaoh and his army the Israelites passed into the wilderness of Shur; they travelled for 3 days without finding water; when they got to Marah they found bitter water, which Moses, with God's help, made sweet and drinkable. But it is the bit that comes after that I want to dwell on "It was there that the Lord laid down a precept and rule of life. He said "If only you will obey the Lord your God, .. , if you will listen to his commands and obey his statutes, then I will never bring on you the sufferings that I brought on the Egyptians; for I the Lord am your healer.

Here we have the second reference to 'obeying all God's commands' (the first was not to eat the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil which stood in the centre of the garden of Eden) – but now we have "all the commands".

It seems to me that this is the start of the very rule-bound society that the Jews were to become. (I was reminded of this last week when I was at the Royal College of Surgeons and one of the surgeons there (obviously Jewish from his skull cap) had all his food brought to him separately, right down to a special cake at afternoon tea.) Indeed, more and more detailed rules were added by Moses. So much so that by the time of Christ, obeying the last letter of the law had become an end in itself, rather than a means to a greater end.

But to return to the Israelites wandering toward Sinai. They passed the oasis of Elim with its springs and palm trees and move on into the wilderness of Sin between Elim and Sinai, about 6 weeks after they had left Egypt and the food and water had run out. So again they complain to Moses and Aaron "If only we had died at the Lord's hand in Egypt where we had plenty of bread to eat; but you have led us out into this wilderness to starve. This was when the Lord promised to send "bread from heaven" (a term we sometimes use for Christ). But it was linked with further instructions and a test.

The Lord sent quails in the evening, and then 'manna' which appeared in the morning. It was said to be "white like coriander seed and tasted like a wafer made with honey". They were instructed to gather just what they needed, and not to keep any for the next day. Those who disobeyed and kept some overnight found that it had gone rotten. This went on for 5 days. On the 6th day they were instructed to gather twice as much and bake it, but to eat only half – with the promise that the remainder would not go rotten; so they had bread to eat on the 7th day – the Sabbath of the Lord. Some did go out to look for manna on the 7th day, but found none. The Lord said "How long will people disobey my instructions? Let each man stay in his home on the 7th day". This reflected the idea of God creating the heavens and the earth in 6 days and resting on the 7th; so arose the Jewish laws relating to keeping the Sabbath which many keep to this day.

The Israelites ate manna every day till they reached the borders of Canaan – it is said for 40 years. At Sinai Moses was given the 10 commandments. The remainder of the chapter of Exodus (which is almost never read in church) relates to more and more rules which cover many aspects of daily life – if you want to know what to do if your ox gores someone, or what to do if you have borrowed a sheep from someone and it dies, – you can find the answer there. If you lend money you must not exact interest in advance from them. It goes into all the food laws; and the offering of your choicest crops to the Lord (the origin of our tithing). Indeed the next book of the Old testament is Leviticus, the laws concerning

offerings and sacrifices; purification and atonement; illness and disease – 27 chapters of laws, much of it repeated in Deuteronomy.

So arose the whole linkage between the Sabbath, meals, and innumerable rules. Jesus was of course a Jew and bound by all those laws, and though in Matthew Jesus says “Do not suppose I have come to abolish the Law; I did not come to abolish but to complete”, he continues and extends the law (e.g. do not commit murder; but I tell you anyone who nurses anger ...). At the same time Jesus and his disciples plucked grains of wheat on the Sabbath, and Jesus turns the Sabbath laws on their head by saying “The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath.” Now, as Christians, we are in a sense freed from this whole mass of Sabbath and dietary laws by Christ. As Paul says in Galatians “The whole law can be summed up in “love your neighbour as yourself” reflecting Christ’s words in John’s record of the last supper “This is my commandment, love one another as I have loved you”.

The second OT feeding I’d like to look at briefly is that of Elijah, when he was fleeing from the wrath of Ahab who had introduced the worship of Baal, and to whom Elijah had prophesied that, because of his wickedness, there would be a great drought. He fled to the Kerith stream and the Lord promised that the ravens would feed him, which they did, bringing bread and meat in the morning and evening. When the Kerith stream dried up Elijah was told to go to a poor widow in Zerephath and asked the widow to feed him from her last handful of flour, promising that if she did so the flour would not run out until the Lord sent rain the land. Finally after the competition with the priests of Baal, Elijah had to flee for his life to the wilderness near Beersheba; when he was about to give up “O lord take away my life” an angel ministered to him with water and a cake so that, sustained by the food he could go on to Mount Horeb. How many living in Ethiopia in the current drought must wish for such a miracle?

But it is not physical feeding we think of with the Eucharist; the point about God’s feeding of Elijah is that he was fed at a time of great stress and fear and that God’s feeding enabled him to go on and do God’s work. Others at terribly stressful times such as soldiers about to go into battle, often take communion. For all of us, who don’t have to flee for our lives or risk them in battle, the Eucharist must be what strengthens us for any of the tasks ahead that we find difficult. If we are doing the work of our Lord, the Eucharist will surely strengthen us when our human resources fail.

For the last meal in the OT we go almost to the book of Daniel and to the famous feast of King Belshazzar. Belshazzar was the son of Nebuchadnezzar, King of Babylon, who had overrun Jerusalem and Judah and taken the Jews into captivity. At the feast Belshazzar ordered that the vessels of gold and silver brought from the temple in Jerusalem to be brought so that he and his concubines could drink from them. As they did so, praising their gods of gold, silver, bronze and iron, wood and stone, a ghostly hand appeared writing on the wall of the banquetting chamber opposite the king which read “*Mene mene tekel u-pharsin*”. No-one could read it, but the queen, when she entered, suggested that they call Daniel “a man of clear understanding and god-like wisdom”. Daniel was promised many riches if he could interpret. He rejected the gifts, but agreed to interpret, saying that Belshazzar, like his father, had set himself up against the Lord God, praised false gods and not honoured the Lord. *Mene* means God has numbered the days of your kingdom and ended it; *tekel* you have been weighed and found wanting; *u-pharsin* your kingdom has been divided and given to the Medes and Persians. Indeed, that very night, Belshazzar was killed by Darius the Mede and Babylon overrun.

So the third of our old testament meals reminds us that the Eucharist is also a meal of judgment, when we need to reflect on our lives, and seek forgiveness for where we have strayed from God’s will for us. As the Bishop reminded us this morning, in his first letter to the Corinthians Paul says we must ‘test ourselves before taking communion; if we do not, we eat and drink judgement on ourselves.

Three things related to the Eucharist that we learn from God feeding his people in the OT: that God does feed us, but there are also rules for our lives; that Christ dramatically simplifies the rules to their essentials; that the Eucharist is particularly important in times of stress; and that it is also a meal with implications of judgement if we do not examine ourselves and seek forgiveness.