

**Sermon**

Sunday 9<sup>th</sup> August, 2009

Lessons

1 Kings 19: 4 - 8

St John 6: 35, 41 – 51

**The angel of the LORD said to Elijah, ‘Arise and eat,  
because the journey is too great for you.’**

**Jesus said, ‘I am the bread of life. If anyone eats of this bread,  
he will live forever....’**

This morning I want to set the scene by giving some historical context, I’ll then give you two illustrations and, finally, I’ll get on to the point that I want to make. So, first of all, a piece of history: I want to take you back to the period 66AD to 70 AD and to the city of Jerusalem, to a four year pocket of history.

The land of Judaea was never at ease with the occupation of the Roman Empire. You may remember that as Jesus triumphantly entered the city of Jerusalem on what we call Palm Sunday, the Roman Governor, Pontius Pilate, was entering the city from the west, leading a vast column of soldiers and horses to reinforce the garrison there. Rome knew that Jerusalem and its surrounding lands were restive under Roman occupation. In 66AD, the discontent erupted into outright revolt. A radical party of Zealots believed that, together, the people of Israel could overpower the might of Rome. For three years, the Romans managed to contain the outbursts of Zealot violence, for three years there was war around Jerusalem. In 70AD, the Jews retreated behind the city walls. They were losing ; the walls were breached. The Roman army made its way to the temple,

a towering structure built by Herod the Great. Inside the temple, the Roman General, Titus, found six thousand Zealots ready to fight to the death. In the words of one commentator:

They fought with extraordinary courage, but when the building caught fire, a terrible cry of horror arose. Some flung themselves on the swords of the Romans; others hurled themselves into the flames. Once the temple had gone, the Jews gave up; they did not even bother to defend the rest of the city....Most of the survivors stood numbly, helplessly, watching Titus' officers efficiently demolishing what was left of the buildings. The Jews had lost their temple once before, but this time it would not be rebuilt.<sup>1</sup>

The temple was gone. The temple had been the central focus of the Jewish faith. It was not only the place of liturgy and ritual, prayer and sacrifice it was, most importantly, the earthly 'home' of Yahweh, of God. The temple housed the *Shekinah*, the divine presence dwelt in the Holy of Holies, in the inner most shrine of the temple. The Jews understood that God was to be encountered everywhere, that creation itself could not contain the Intelligent Mind but, nevertheless, they found it supremely helpful to set apart one space, one sacred space, in which to come before their Maker. The psalmist said, 'Be still, and know that I am God.' Nowhere would that have been truer than in the inner courts of the temple. But, the temple was gone and gone for good.

What happens next is that scribes, priests and Pharisees (laymen) gathered together as a community to face up to the task of moving Judaism from a temple

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<sup>1</sup> Karen Armstrong *The Case for God* p81

faith to a faith solely rooted in the Torah, the written scriptures. Although there were different sects, one community stood out: led by Rabbi Yohanan, it was founded on the teaching of Hillel, a Jewish teacher and prophet, who lived at the same time as Jesus. There is a wonderful story about Hillel:

One day, a pagan had approached Hillel and promised to convert to Judaism if Hillel could teach him the entire Torah standing on one leg. Hillel replied: ‘What is hateful to you, do not to your fellow man. That is the whole of the Torah and the remainder is but commentary. Go learn it.’<sup>2</sup>

So far, I have given some historical context; now, let me give you two illustrations, both of which are stories associated with the Hillel community. The first story is about their first leader, Rabbi Yohanan, and the second story is about Yohanan’s successor, Rabbi Akiva. The first story, very short, concerning Rabbi Yohanan, is this:

One day, when Rabbi Yohanan was studying the Torah with his pupils, the Holy Spirit seemed to descend upon them in the form of fire and a rushing wind.<sup>3</sup>

The second story, concerning Rabbi Akiva, is to do with the interpretation of scripture and, through continual study, discover new insights, new revelations.

This is the story:

[Rabbi Akiva’s] fame had reached heaven and that, intrigued, Moses decided to come down to earth and attend one of [the rabbi’s] classes. He sat in the eighth row behind the other students and discovered, to his embarrassment, that he could not

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<sup>2</sup> ibid p83

<sup>3</sup> ibid p84

understand a word of Akiva's exposition of the Torah that had been revealed to *him*, Moses, on Mount Sinai. 'My sons have surpassed me,' Moses reflected ruefully, like any proud parent, as he made his way back to heaven.<sup>4</sup>

I hope that you can see where I am going. The Jewish teacher and prophet, Hillel, lived around the time of Jesus, almost exactly the same period. The community which was reflecting on Hillel's teaching was writing around the period of 70AD to 100AD, the exact same period in which the Gospels were written. The Hillel community has the same or very similar ethical teaching as that of the first Christians, they too have a Pentecost-type story and, like the Gospels, they have stories, which are myth, faith narratives, which convey truth, not fact. The Jewish writers were attempting to express what they knew to be inexpressible: to write about the Divine Presence, the Holy One, the Intelligent Mind, the ineffable.

Judaism went in the direction of saying that it was the study of the Torah which was food from heaven, the very sustenance we need in this life. The teaching is ethical through and through: 'What is hateful to yourself, do not to your fellow man.' The Christian Jews founded their community on the life and teaching of Jesus of Nazareth. Jesus said, 'Love the LORD your God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength and love your neighbour as yourself.' Jesus said, 'Love your enemies.' The Christians Jews deeply believed that what they encountered in and through the life and teaching of Jesus was the *Shekinah*, the

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<sup>4</sup> *ibid* p93

Divine Presence. Where Rabbi Yohanan and his pupils had felt the Holy Spirit descend upon them as they studied the Torah, the Christians Jews felt the presence of God as they recalled and studied and immersed themselves in the teaching and life of Jesus.

I have given you some historical context and I have given you a couple of illustrations. Let me now come to the point I want to make. Christians Jews, Christians, felt the presence of God as they recalled and studied and immersed themselves in the teaching and life of Jesus. The Emmaus Road story is the most explicit articulation of this. Jesus is the bread of life, the food and sustenance we need for this life. The biblical scholar, Marcus Borg, says that much of the language surrounding Jesus is metaphorical. Borg states:

We see this most readily by putting a number of titles in a single sentence: ‘I believe Jesus is the Lamb of God, the Light of the World, the Bread of Life, the Word of God, and the Son of God.’

Borg says:

To state the obvious, Jesus is not a lamb or a sheep, not a flame or a candle, not a loaf, not a word (not a sound or writing on a page.) These are all metaphors.<sup>5</sup>

Borg concludes, ‘Jesus is a metaphor of God....Indeed, for us as Christians, he is *the* metaphor of God.’<sup>6</sup> In the wilderness, Elijah is so broken by life, so deep is his darkness and suffering, that he wants to die. He feels himself to be worthless and life has no meaning. Yet, we are told in the narrative that an

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<sup>5</sup> Marcus Borg *The Heart of Christianity* p87

<sup>6</sup> *ibid* p96

angel of the LORD spoke to him and brought him bread and water: God sustained and nourished Elijah in his wilderness, darkness and suffering. The faith narrative that is the oldest book in the Bible, the Book of Job, is the story of God journeying with us in our darkness. And, in the Gospels and in the writing of St Paul, more time is spent reflecting on the suffering, death and resurrection of Jesus than on any other aspect of his life. The Christian-Jewish writers, through study and meditation, were revealing insights into the mystery of God's Presence, the Divine Presence, the *Shekinah*, in and through human suffering. Though His suffering is too intense for Him to be conscious or aware of God's Presence with Him, Jesus' faith does not give way. The Resurrection is a vindication of that faith and of His ethical teaching. The First Noble Truth of Buddhism is: 'Everything is suffering.' From the Book of Job at the beginning to the very last book written, the Bible is about the presence of God in human suffering and darkness; it is about bringing meaning to this life and universe when, to be frank, meaning and purpose and value are not always apparent.

In her new book, *The Case for God*, Karen Armstrong says that, almost from the very beginning of human history, men and women have committed themselves to religious activity. She writes:

Religious people are ambitious. They want lives overflowing with significance.....Instead of being crushed and embittered by the sorrow

of life, they sought to retain their peace and serenity in the midst of their pain. They yearned for the courage to overcome their terror of mortality; instead of being grasping and mean-spirited, they aspired to live generously, large-heartedly and justly and to inhabit every single part of their humanity.... They tried to honour the ineffable mystery they sensed in each human being and create societies that honoured the stranger, the alien, the poor and the oppressed.<sup>7</sup>

Let me close with a story told by Marcus Borg of a visit he and his wife made to Assisi. Assisi was the home of Francis; it is a mountain town in Italy. In his early twenties, Francis had a vision of Jesus, renounced his wealth and all his possessions, and began a life devoted to God. ‘Francis found God everywhere – in the birds, the animals, the sun, the moon, death – and his life was marked by a contagious joy. He was known for his embrace of “Lady Poverty”, as he called her, and his radical identification with the poor. Shortly before his death, according to the stories about him, he received stigmata, the wounds of Christ in his hands, feet and side.’ A few years after his death, the Basilica of St Francis, a masterpiece of architecture, was built in Assisi and filled with some of the greatest art works in the world. Borg said:

As my wife and I spent hours in this extraordinary and extravagant basilica dedicated to Francis...I thought about Francis and his passion for the poor. He would not have wanted such wealth spent on honouring him. He would have said, ‘It’s not about me.’

And yet,.....I don’t think the basilica is a mistake.....It reminds us of Francis, draws us to Assisi, perhaps even draws us to Francis’s vision. And because Francis pointed beyond himself to God and Jesus, we may be drawn into an even larger vision.

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<sup>7</sup> Karen Armstrong *The Case for God* p315f

In churches, in plain, small country churches, in large city churches and cathedrals, through our theology of Jesus, creeds, worship, art, music, architecture and liturgy, we are honouring Jesus. He may have said, 'It's not about me.' A man once addressed Jesus, 'Good Teacher.' Jesus came back at him, 'Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone.' Jesus may say, 'It's not about me,' but His life was transfigured by God each day; His passion for justice was God's passion and through His personal suffering, the first Christians saw the *Shekinah* and the suffering of God. They saw a new insight, a new revelation.

In our lifetime, we have the opportunity to learn about God from Jesus, to immerse ourselves in his life and teaching and to have our lives overflow with significance: at best, to gain peace and serenity through pain, courage in facing our mortality and generosity in all our dealings with our fellow human beings.

Is there a better way to live?

Amen.