

## NO FREE LUNCH

Trinity VIII

St. Michael, Cornhill

Sunday, July 26<sup>th</sup> 2015

Sung Eucharist

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Some of you may have read Edmund Gosse's autobiographical memoir, *Father and Son*. Gosse's father, Philip Henry Gosse, was an early zoological specialist whose drawings of various animals – including marine life – were both beautiful and pioneering in their detail. Gosse held in contrast, however, with his scientific expertise a fundamentalist Christian faith – he was a member of some branch of the *Brethren* movement. Indeed, a good deal of Edmund's reflections rail against his father's religion; Edmund became an agnostic, perhaps even an atheist, and he gives the impression of having had a dreadful relationship with his father. Ann Thwaite's stunning revisionist biography of Philip, *Glimpses of the Wonderful* disproves this. They were in fact very close.

Perhaps the most staggering tale told by Edmund which suggests a poor father/son relationship focuses on Christmas lunch. Strict Brethren do not observe the feasts. Edmund recounts not being allowed Christmas Pudding. So, he goes below stairs, and the servants let him have some. Father stumbles on Edmund eating the pudding and Edmund tells of his father throwing the pudding, plate and all into the fire. Ann Thwaite's later biography suggests that this incident never happened!

However, happen or not, Edmund's tale suggests just how important a formal lunch was for his family. The more senior amongst us will chime in with this. As a child, Sunday lunch for me had something of the air of a ritual. It was the one day in the week we'd repair to the dining room and not eat in the kitchen. The menu was, almost without exception, roast beef; the one piece of domestic life which my father always observed was carving the joint. This was preceded by a menacing sharpening of the knife on a steel. As I said, the whole affair was ritualised.

One sadness now is how many families rarely eat together around a table at all. Instead it's snacks taken individually in front of a television or next to the computer. But in some areas of life, common meals are still prominent. Around here, for example, livery dinners probably happen somewhere almost every evening. Business deals are often hatched over meals. When I was working for the Archbishop of Canterbury as his Foreign Secretary, his Ecumenical Officer, we would not think of arranging a Patriarchal Visit here without one or two 'set-piece' dinners.

Indeed, religions so often focus on a common meal. Certainly that's true of the Judaeo-Christian tradition. The Jewish Passover is what helped identify the Israelite nation: still the Passover helps define Judaism. The *seder* meal on the eve of each *Sabbath* defines the family. So too, of course, with Christianity. Here we are, two thousand years on still celebrating the eucharist, weekly or even daily. Our readings today take us right to the heart of this. That brief vignette from the second book of the Kings sets the scene: 'Elisha says: "Give, the barley and grain to the people and let them eat. . . , then moments later, for thus says the Lord: "They shall eat and have some left."'"

The gospel reading from St. John's Gospel picks up the same theme. It's fascinating, because as a story it's one of the *few* that St. John shares with the other gospel accounts; it's there in all four – the feeding of the five thousand. But it's also a sharp reminder of one of the strangest contrasts between John's gospel and the other three gospels. John is the only gospel

not to have an account of the institution of the eucharist, the mass, at the Last Supper. That supper in John focuses on the washing of the feet and the role of Judas. However, John doesn't forget the eucharist. Instead, he devotes an entire chapter to it.

We heard the beginning of it this morning in the feeding of the five thousand. The rest of chapter six is entirely consumed (if I might use that term when talking of a meal) by the eucharist. The disciples talk of the *manna* given by God to Israel. Jesus says: 'For the bread of God is that which comes down from heaven and gives life to the world.' The disciples plead: 'Lord, give us this bread always.' Jesus replies: '*I am the bread of life.*' The chapter concludes with dialogue with the Jews – still about the bread. Jesus memorably reflects: 'He who eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I shall raise him up on the last day'

There's a favourite cliché oft repeated and doubtless frequently here in this, the heart of the City of London. That cliché is: 'There's no such thing as a free lunch.' Of course, in our daily lives that's often manifestly true. But, without sounding sacrilegious, the eucharist is the supreme, the eternal (to use Jesus' words) 'free lunch'. By that I mean that in the eucharist, God gives himself; in the eucharist, the Church is made plain, gathered around the altar; in the eucharist, we are given God's transformation of our lives.

The Anglican writer, Gregory Dix, wrote memorably of the eucharist. I've only time to give you a snippet. In a purple passage he wrote of Jesus' words, '*Do this in remembrance of me.*':

'Was ever such a command so obeyed? For century after century, spreading slowly to every continent and country, and among every race on earth, this action has been done. . . . from the pinnacles of earthly greatness, to the refuge of fugitives in caves and dens of the earth . . . for kings at their crownings, and for criminals going to the scaffold. . . . for a schoolchild sitting an examination, or for Columbus setting out to discover America . . . on the beach at Dunkirk - *furtively*, by an exiled bishop who had hewn timber all day in a prison camp near Murmansk; *gorgeously* for the canonisation of Joan of Arc. . . and best of all, week by week, month by month, on a hundred thousand successive Sundays, *faithfully, unfailingly*, across all the parishes of Christendom...'

It's marvellous stuff and there's much more. It does press home the truth that if ever there was a *free meal*, that is a meal given through God's grace and generosity, *this is it*. No wonder the Gosses got themselves into a twist about a common meal! But this eucharist in which we are all participating, at this very moment, transcends even that - more than a thousand fold.

Amen.

### Readings

II Kings. 4. 42-44.

Ephesians. 3. 14 - 21.

John. 6. 1-21.