

THE GIFT TO BE SIMPLE

Trinity IX

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Although I've never attempted it, I imagine an analysis of a month's headlines in any of the national dailies would yield some profit. As a daily '*Times*' reader, I'd guess that at least one headline about *health risks* appears each week. One week it's swine flu and the next bird flu. Think what it might be if pigs could fly. All I do know is that at the height of one bird flu panic I was in New Zealand. There the custom of welcome is to rub noses – well I rubbed about two hundred noses and no bird flu... The other panic is in what you eat. Almost everything seems to be bad for you. I remember our two sons being served up with wholemeal spaghetti. No salt, no sugar, no additives, my wife proudly declared. Unenthusiastically the meal was consumed and afterwards the two sons declared – no salt, no sugar, no additives, and positively *no taste!*

So, thinking of food and our satisfaction with, the tale we heard from Exodus this morning about manna has a sequel. Far from gratitude for escape from starvation, in the book *Numbers*, the Israelites stage a corporate moan. It sounds, from their complaints, as if manna was like wholemeal spaghetti – boring. The whole community chanted: 'We remember the fish in Egypt, the melons, cucumbers, leeks, onions and garlic.' Manna may have been a gift, but it's not what they wanted. Waitrose in Marylebone High Street was their desire, supplemented by the delicacies of the nearby fromagerie, patisserie and boucherie!

Now interestingly enough, that second reading was also about gifts. From the letter to the Ephesians, we heard this: 'When Christ ascended on high, he gave gifts to men. And his gifts were that some should be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and leaders to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ.' The emphasis is on the great variety of different gifts. It's the sort of thing we encourage in discipleship. Each of us has gifts. What might yours or mine be? How do we prosper them? Similarly in training clergy – all are different. How can the different gifts God gives to different clergy be used?

But even this can go wrong. When I was training, so-called 'T-groups' or '*Therapy groups*' were just going out of fashion, so the Church of England, of course, decided to embrace them. I was in a group of eight and the going was not good. We weren't getting angry enough with each other – too little abrasion. So the facilitators decided on a game.

We were each given a piece of paper. We were asked to rate the other members of the group at what we thought were their strengths, their God-given gifts. Were they pastors, fund-raisers, administrators, contemplatives, liturgists, musicians and so on? Each person – except you yourself – was to be rated 1-7 on each strength. So it was, and the marks were added up. Well, it provoked anger all right – and worse still, much grief! For guess what, those who saw themselves as pastors were winners of the jumble-sale organising contest. The contemplatives turned out to be administrators, and so on! One poor chap came out bottom in everything!

But there is one piece of common ground in both these different stories of gifts. Both times, through God's grace and unending generosity remarkable gifts are given. In the first, a community – a nation even – survives famine because of God's great gift. In the second, individuals are given gifts which if taken together – prosper each other and ultimately give fruit to fulfilled individuals and nurture at least functional – or better still – richly endowed

communities. Yet, in each case, a churlishness can strangle these gifts at birth. We wish we'd been given a *different* gift!

So does our final reading, then, our gospel, throw any light on the richness of these first two tales, which so easily can go wrong? Can we avoid God's generosity being rejected through a lack of gratitude? Our gospel was part of that amazing sixth chapter of John which focuses on the eucharist. Last week we heard the first part – the feeding of the 5,000. *Amazing Grace* to quote that popular hymn. God gives of his bounty to the hungry crowd. The light silhouette or gentle shadow of the eucharist fills the background. That's what the story is implicitly about.

But the response to Jesus here from his followers is discouraging: '...what sign do you do, that we may see and believe you? What work do you perform? Our fathers ate manna in the wilderness...' (they don't bother to mention their fathers' moanings and ingratitude) Jesus replies: 'It was not *Moses*' (that is another human being like you and me) 'who gave the bread from heaven, but my *Father*.' They then crave the bread – 'give us this bread always...' and Jesus responds: '*I am the bread of life*...he who comes to me shall not hunger, and he who believes in me shall never thirst.' We should, of course, now say 'he or she'.

The key lies then in the nature of God, as we see that nature made plain in our own humanity, in Jesus. For the measure of Jesus' life was *self-giving*. It was *not* about getting for *me*; it was about giving to others. It was about looking away from self, focusing on God. Living our lives in *that* way means that life *radically changes*. The old Shaker song, the melody of which was used by Aaron Copland in his ballet suite *Appalachian Spring* and then in the 1960s, by Sydney Carter in his song, *Lord of the Dance* captures it:

'Tis the gift to be simple,
'Tis the gift to be free
'Tis the gift to come down,
Where we ought to be.

That song captures a transformation – simplicity implies living for others. We look outwards, we cherish the gifts in each other, in our husbands or wives, our children and parents, our friends and those with whom we work. What does that look like? Well, look around you, look at the person next to you now. There in that person you will see God's grace – and this eucharist is the meal of such a family always looking out in gratitude to that imagined likeness of Christ, in our neighbour's face. Amen

Readings

Exodus 16. 2-4, 9-15.

Ephesians. 4. 1-16.

John. 6. 24-35.