

THE SEVENTH SUNDAY AFTER TRINITY 2016

“Jesus called his disciples unto him, and saith unto them, I have compassion on the multitude, because they have now been with me three days, and have nothing to eat... .”

The meaning of the lessons appointed for the Seventh Sunday after Trinity is in some sense clear. In the Epistle lesson we have heard a continuation of last Sunday’s lesson from Paul’s letter to the Romans. Having been reminded last Sunday that by Baptism we are both buried with Christ in his death and raised to newness of life, so in this morning’s Epistle we are reminded to walk in the new life – that life described by Jesus last week as love for enemies, turning the other cheek, blessing those by whom we are persecuted. The Gospel lesson today reminds us that this new life requires spiritual nourishment – the heavenly life of love, you might say, requires a heavenly food to nourish it in us. The miracle of the feeding of the multitudes in the wilderness specifically reminds us that Jesus is that food. Bread and fish are taken, blessed, broken and given in the Gospel just as Jesus will be broken, as it were, upon the Cross and given for the life of world. That giving of Himself is remembered and represented in every Holy Communion – the bread broken, the cup poured out. The new life of the Spirit is by spiritual food. All of this, I think, is at least part of the plain meaning of the pairing of the lessons today.

And yet this morning I would like to think not much about the general meaning of the lessons for this Sunday, but about one small detail in the Gospel: “Jesus called his disciples unto him”, we have read, “and saith unto them, I have compassion on the multitude, because they have now been with me *three days*, and have nothing to eat”. Why three days?

Three days, of course, is always a significant timespan in the Scriptures. For example, it is for three days that Abraham travels to Mount Moriah where he has been told to sacrifice his son Isaac; for three days, Jonah is in the belly of the whale; for three days, Jesus is in the tomb. All of these ‘three day stories’ in one way or another conclude with accounts of resurrection. Abraham, for example, is as if raised from the dead when he discovers that he need not sacrifice his only son; Jonah is restored to life when he emerges from the belly of the whale; Jesus is literally resurrected on that first Easter Sunday. All of these images of three day events are more or less well known and they are all of them stories of pilgrimage through darkness to life.

Less well known are the “three days” discussed in this morning’s Gospel: “they have now been with me three days,” says Jesus. Today’s miracle of the feeding of the multitudes is meant to call to mind the story of the people of Israel in the Old Testament as they journeyed from captivity in Egypt to the Promised Land. There, Moses asks Pharaoh to allow Israel to journey three days into the wilderness to worship God and hear his Word. There is a journey for them, and as for the crowd today, hunger, and a miraculous feeding. But there is, I think, in this morning’s reminder that the crowds have been with Jesus for three days, something still deeper at work than this parallel between Old and New Testament stories.

Rather, in the Scriptures, very specific things happen during every three day journey: Abraham, for example, travels in fear and trembling to the place where he has been asked by God to surrender the one thing he holds most dear, his son; Jonah is in the belly of the whale, for three days compelled to go precisely where he does not wish to be; and Jesus in his three days

suffers first betrayal, false accusations, crucifixion and death before finally, on Holy Saturday, harrowing hell – that is, going to the place of the dead to preach the Gospel to those who’d gone before him. And what I would like to suggest for our prayers today is simply this: that in one way or another we are meant to recall all of these three day journeys because we might be living them... . Some of us like Abraham may well be learning right now that we must love everyone in our lives as Abraham loves Isaac – that is, love them by offering them to God (because the meaning of their life is in him and not in us); some of us, like Jonah, are being carried to a place we do not wish to go or whose purpose we can only dimly see, but which is nonetheless God’s will for us (we are in the belly of the whale and it is dark); some of us like Christ on Good Friday have been betrayed or falsely accused; and some of us are trying to speak a word of healing like Jesus on Holy Saturday to those who seem otherwise dead, as if we too were harrowing hell. In addition to all of this, still others of us no doubt feel as though *we* are the dead – desperate for a word of life, for Christ to come down and speak to us. “Jesus called his disciples unto him”, we have read, “and saith unto them, I have compassion on the multitude, because they have now been with me *three days*, and have nothing to eat”.

It would not be too much to say that for us today, St George’s is the mountain in the wilderness from which our Lord teaches in the Gospel; and we are the crowd for whom he has compassion, each of us on our three day journey through life; and at this altar the miracle of heavenly bread will be Christ’s miracle for us, giving us not bread and fish but the bread and wine of his Body and Blood. And as inasmuch as we will allow ourselves to be raised from the dead here, we must in our turn and by God’s grace raise the dead in our lives – all those others who are making their own three days journeys.

Let me conclude with just this observation: there is an almost endless series of three day events in the Scriptures that allow us to understand this morning's Gospel in new and deeper ways. But the first appearance of the third day in Scripture is perhaps the most instructive. It occurs in the story of creation, at the very beginning of the Bible. It is on the third day, we read there, that God separates the land and the water and creates the fruit and herb yielding trees and plants – that is, it is on the third day that he makes the world fruitful and, quite literally, edible. The grape that yields wine and the wheat that makes bread – all are created on the third day. That fruitfulness on the third day is meant to be ours – our lives becoming nourishment for each other just as we are nourished by the Lord. This is our fruitfulness. But crucially, to nourish another will always require a three day journey – it will be, with Abraham, learning to offer them to God; it will be, like Jonah, going to them in a place we do not wish to be; it may be, like Jesus, loving those who seem otherwise dead. Jesus is our food, made fruitful for us; in us, he is made food yet again for one another.

There are many accounts of events that occur after three days in the Scriptures. This morning's miracle of the feeding in the wilderness is one of them – after three days, Jesus feeds the crowds with heavenly food before they return to their homes so that they do not faint on the way. And so we are fed today, all of us who are living our three days like Abraham perhaps, or like Jonah, or like Christ himself – we are fed so that we shall not faint on the way. And more, we are fed so that we might be fruitful for one another. AMEN.