**St Godwald’s 18 July 2021**

What is it that …thrills you, when you read the bible?

When I asked that question in another place, I was met by baffled looks. Some affirmations too, yes, but I got the impression that being thrilled wasn’t necessarily a common response.

So how about you?

Don’t worry, I don’t want an answer now, and, as with every aspect of our Bible reading together, it’s not a test; you’re not more Christian if you’re thrilled and you’re not less Christian if you’re not. I’m just interested!

So, as we’re all in this Bible reading thing together – when was the last time **I** was thrilled by the Bible?

Friends, I find thrills in it every day. Not every minute of every day, but certainly every day. But it’s a difficult book sometimes, and contains some difficult things.

Like the threat of Babies’ heads being dashed against rocks. Murder. Lies and deceit, and unnecessary suffering casually caused. Yes, it does have it’s moments.

So…what have the lectionary compilers given us to thrill at today?

This part of Psalm 89 is an affirmation of David’s kingship, probably written from exile. And I think it’s liturgy; it was part of a service. It’s headed, as you see, ‘A Maskil of Ethan the Ezrahite’. A Maskil I found defined as

*….‘a musical instruction that denotes a specific responsive mode of performance defined as complex antiphony because it involves the gathering of distant segments of the text through a dialogue between choirs, each of them…’*

Spoiler alert - it’s a communal song, folks; it’s a hymn.  Ethan was a Temple musician; he’s mentioned in 1 Chronicles 15 where, in verse 19, he’s mentioned as part of a worship band list. Specifically, he *sounds the bronze cymbals*; so he was a performer and a composer in this community – just an ordinary, jobbing choir member, who liked doing a bit of percussion on the side.

I find that glimpse of a community of faith thrilling. Thrilling too is that we still have it, that someone gathered the words of the community together – and by that collection, they are saying something about the importance their God and showing us how they wish to praise God.

In the Psalm itself, there’s a little bad news for David’s offspring, depending on how they behave, but God’s commitment to David in emphasised, which ensures that he has political legitimacy through his theological claim.

So it’s all happy by verse 37, - but if we had read on, the next words, from verse 38 onwards, are ‘But now…’, and in that turn of mood characteristic of many psalms, the bitterness of the exile from which Ethan is writing overwhelms this affirmation – the real story is ‘why has all of this been taken away’? Chunks of Psalms are dangerous things. What might seem a psalm of celebration is sometimes really a psalm of lament. Read as a whole, it’s thrilling, first-hand evidence of a community expressing themselves in pain.

In Mark we have a snapshot of Jesus’s pastoral ministry. As ever, it’s all about giving and loving. Giving, and loving. Sounds simple, doesn’t it?

Jesus of Nazareth, fully human and fully divine, is taking the time to heal and feed ordinary people. In Mark, it’s all about giving; in the Psalm, it’s all about receiving. Jesus always gives; David often receives. I sometimes wonder if that’s a basic difference between the New Testament and the Hebrew Scriptures. They seem to speak differently, sometimes, about the direction of travel of God’s grace.

What is it that thrills me about the bible?

Well, here we are, with two vastly different views of God, written by real people; Ethan and Mark, both expressing their theology, their understanding of who God is for them and for their community. The psalmist, in their exile and despair, is steeped in the old Hebrew Testament stories and promises. Mark, probably the earliest Gospel writer, is steeped in this new thing that has happened, just 20 years ago, within Judaism. That’s what I find thrilling about the Bible – this exchange, this living thought, this moving and thinking as people millennia ago wrestled with their *common, beloved word* –and tried to see how it might relate to how they live. We’re still doing the same thing now; it’s our word too. We’re reading the same words and then wondering the same wonderings.

And in our Gospel today, we have the outer edges of the feeding of the 5000. The miracle is missing. It’s like having the opening and closing titles of a really good film and missing the film itself out.

But the thrill I found, after checking I’d not just got it wrong, came in this question; how do you keep on living, staying hopeful, staying faithful when you think the miracle has been taken away? In this Gospel as its presented today we don’t see a miraculous act of Jesus, we just see the more mundane prequel and sequel.

But teaching and healing, being with people, which is what Jesus is upto in this reading, are the heart and soul of his ministry. He does these things because he loves the people. They love him for the same reasons. So perhaps the real miracle, shown to us *accidentally* by the shape of the Gospel reading for today, is that Jesus remains present when all seems to be devoid of miracles; friends, isn’t that what we have all clung onto through Covid 19 – which has been on the face of it anything BUT a miraculous time?

Jesus is most characteristic to and in us within the mundane, the everyday, the things we sometimes think of as routine. That’s the thrill of reading the Bible, and of being a Christian; our leader, our great high priest has shown us the way that we can *all* be leaders, we can guide each other, that we can all give and receive to and from each other, *every day*. That’s the real miracle of Christ Jesus. That’s the thrill.

OK, we might not be able to multiply food by quite the same methods – my own skills concentrate on making cakes disappear rather than appear, for example - but we can all, in all of our diverse and blessed God-given ministries, thrill people, by how *we* teach and how *we* offer healing.

So…what is it that thrills me when I read the Bible?

Friends, where do I start?

Amen. 18.7.21