Sermon – Trinity 9 St Godwald’s

During this past COVID year, have you broken any habits or taken up any new ones?

The term ‘habit’ carries with it perhaps negative connotations; things we’re not proud of, rather than things we are. There is amongst clergy a general concern that the habit of churchgoing has been broken for many this past year; that it will take time to restore the habit of coming to church regularly and that for some, that habit may simply have gone for good. Please, if you’re aware of that amongst any of your friends, please encourage them to return.

The new habit I’ve taken up this past year is bread-making. Liz and I have bought fewer than half a dozen loaves this past year; the rest I’ve made myself. It is remarkably easy – bread flour (I find 3/5ths wholemeal works well); yeast; a little salt and sugar, water and then a considerable amount of effort wrestling with the dough. The longer you spend stretching and pummelling the dough, the better the loaf.

On Friday night I began too late in the evening to finish the loaf before bedtime so I put the partly risen dough in the fridge overnight. Early Saturday morning I took it out and found it cold and stiff – eventually, I breathed some life into it and to my surprise and delight it turned out well.

Now the point in telling you all this is not simply to share with you a new thrice-weekly habit for which, ironically, I have lockdown to thank, but to reflect on my phrase ‘to my surprise and delight it turned out well’. Why was I surprised?

This morning’s two readings are all about bread: the manna from heaven that fed the Israelites on their journey towards the promised land, and Jesus, the bread of life; nourishment for all giving true life to the world.

In both stories, the people of Israel in the OT and the disciples in the NT, couldn’t recognise the gifts given them by God. Despite being handed so much on a plate, their lack of trust meant their doubts flourished.

Rescued from slavery in Egypt, freedom quickly turned sour on the journey the Israelites were forced to take through the wilderness. Death in slavery began to appear more attractive than death by starvation in the desert. The people turned on Moses and began to doubt his leading by God. Yet the faithfulness of God ensured survival, though, as you will recall, despite such overwhelming evidence of God’s love for his people, the faithlessness of the people of Israel continued.

Things hadn’t improved thousands of years later with the disciples whose trust and faith in Jesus is repeatedly shown to be shallow. The disciples who lived alongside Jesus for several years did not recognise him for who he is; they could not grasp his divinity; at times, they couldn’t even grasp the meaning of his stories.

This time though, God in Jesus, does not replicate the God of the wilderness desert; this time he does not produce the goods; requests for performative evidence of divinity are rejected; there’s no manna from heaven for the disciples. This time, simple trust in Jesus is called for.

Our unwillingness to trust God is breath taking. I use the term unwillingness deliberately. It is not a question of being unable to trust. Trust is something we exercise all the time.

You came to church this morning trusting that someone would be here to lead a service… Now you might counter that by saying, “every other time we’ve come to church there’s been a minister here so it’s reasonable to expect that will be the case today!”.

And that is precisely my point. Your experience tells you that you can trust your ministers to keep church life going.

So why is trusting in God more problematic? Haven’t you, stories to tell of God’s faithfulness to you in your own life? We might need help articulating those stories but I know they are there. We know God is faithful; after all, we are the fruits of his faithfulness!

I’m reading *Wolf Hall* at the moment, Hilary Mantel’s monumental narrative of the life of King Henry 8th and his split with Rome. That period of history was pretty bleak for all sorts of reasons, one of which was the extent to which people were deliberately held in ignorance as to what scripture said. Few could read the bible until it was mandated in the 1530s that every parish church should have an English bible.

One lasting outcome of that process was that the church became, and remains, obsessed with deriving its understanding of God from the Bible. Ever since the Synod of Whitby in the 7th century tied the church in these Isles to Rome, the Church had been the sole purveyor of divine truth. If you wanted to know what God thought, you asked the clergy, preferably a Bishop, and even better the Pope. With the Bible in English, everyone could have an opinion.

But there is another tradition that respects scripture but looks instead to creation for the ultimate in the divine Word. This tradition has many voices down the ages from Augustine of Hippo to the Iona Community and in these Isles is best represented by Celtic Christianity. Today it is making a comeback with new initiatives like ‘Forest Churches’ that focus on celebrating God in nature, not God inside four walls.

Those of us who are fit enough to walk out into the countryside, touch upon this side of our faith every time we gaze upon a Meadow Vetching flower, glimpse a stoat running across our path, or on that rare occasion of beauty meeting tragedy, watch as a grey heron swoops on an unsuspecting fish in the canal. Here is God’s book, said Augustine, why look any further?

The Carmina Gadelica, is a collection of hundreds of oral Gaelic prose and poems drawn together during the 19th century by Alexander Carmichael. He literally walked the highlands collecting hundreds of incantations before they were lost to eternity.

Many of these poems celebrate the beauty but also the perilous nature of creation. Here are the voices of people for whom life was tough and trust was not an option.

To return to where I began, if my bread failed on Saturday morning, I knew the co-op was only a short walk away and I easily had the resources to start again or even buy a loaf. If it had been my only chance of food yesterday, would my trust in the chemical processes of bread making, gifted to us by God, have been greater or more naturally expressed?

I’m going to close by reading one of the blessings Carmichael collected. It reminds us that when we doubt, those who have gone before us, seek to reassure us; that when we journey – through a task, a challenge, physically or to death’s door – we do not do so unaccompanied, but are gently steered by unseen angels. For that to be true for you, asks only for an open heart and simple trust and then we will begin to recognise the divine in every face we meet and every step we take.

Be each saint in heaven,

Each sainted woman in heaven,

Each angel in heaven

Stretching their arms for you,

Smoothing the way for you,

When you go hither

Over the river hard to see;

Oh when you go thither home, over the river, hard to see. Amen.