

Pentecost 12B 1 Kings 8:22-30, 41-43; Psalm 84; Ephesians 6:10-20; John 6:56-59

Jesus has the words of eternal life – stand firm

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen

The Philippines is an extraordinarily poor country. The Igorot people in the north are some of the poorest in the country. One village we went to would experience famine for half of the year. Child mortality was high, basic nutrition was well below the national average and children could not go to school because so much time was spent growing food and fetching water. As you know the Anglican Church is involved in community development work there. Community development work is about finding ways to help a community help itself address fundamental needs and decrease the level of poverty. One of the questions I asked people I met in the Philippines who were engaged in community development work was “why do you do this work”

Quite a few times I got the answer – “Well it is because of what Jesus said. “I came that you may have life and have it more abundantly”. They then say, “I am a Christian. It is part of my job”. There was a clarity about these peoples understanding of what it meant to be a Christian. They understood so completely that Jesus was about life – abundant, full, eternal life.

That’s the nub of it isn’t it? Jesus does have the words of eternal life - life in completeness, life abundantly, life beyond all our human abilities. He was on to something pretty extraordinary.

Yet if we look closely it was also something outrageous and unbelievable. I recently read about a convert to Christianity, Charles Amjad-Ali who now teaches at Lutheran seminary. He was born in Pakistan. His mother is Hindu. His father is Muslim and he was brought up a Muslim. Part of what intrigued him about Christianity was its absurdness. It was either the biggest joke or it had to be true. I think that the absurdness of Christianity, (which we who have been in the church for a long may often take for granted,) is part of what makes the following the way of Christ so hard.

In today’s gospel the absurdity is the assertion that Jesus is bread! Jesus is bread that

came down from heaven! We are to chew on his flesh to have life!!! Upon hearing such statements for the first time, we might have exclaimed, "Good God, what kind of lunatic is this man!!!"

Jesus listeners at the time found it incomprehensible and some who had previously chosen to follow him turned away. But lunatic or not Peter recognized that Jesus had the words of eternal life – to whom else would the 12 go?

We who call ourselves Christians, followers of Christ, commit ourselves to this outrageous, unbelievable, absurd faith where Jesus is food and water, comes down from heaven, raises the dead and is raised by God. Of course theologians and Christian philosophers have wrote countless volumes explaining the rationality of the Christian faith. Christian scientists have spent their life trying to assure the doubters that being a Christian and a sane, scientific human being is perfectly compatible. They are perfectly right of course but all their good work cannot hide the shocking revelation of Jesus Christ – the stumbling block to Jews and gentiles but to those in the know the way to eternal life.

If you are in the know about Jesus, if you have been touched by grace and have been humble enough to open yourself up to Gods Spirit then somewhere deep inside you are certain that Jesus is the way, the truth and the life. There is something about the man that compels you, feeds you, calls you, nurtures you, and enriches your life. For me it is a call into fullness of life where there is the possibility that I can become the person God loves me to be – an integrated, loving woman at peace with herself, her God and her neighbours.

It is way, a truth and a life but what a way! What a challenge! And what stumbling blocks we come up against. It is very easy to get derailed.

Here are some examples. I've been practicing this:

Imagine a journey – a beginning and an end – on the way

Stumbling blocks from popular culture

Missionaries are perfect nuisances and leave every place worse than they found it. - Charles Dickens.

Religion is the opium of the masses – Karl Marx

The Bible and the Church have been the greatest stumbling blocks in the way of women's emancipation. Elizabeth Cady Stanton.

Church is just for weak people who need a crutch

Stumbling blocks from ourselves

If I go into a church it will collapse – I am not a very good person.

God could never possibly want me

I don't believe in things the way I should

Stumbling blocks from the man himself

What – he died on a cross and rose from the dead three days later!!

There is one other stumbling block I'd particularly like draw your attention to...

To do that I'll need to go back and look at the Old Testament reading. As Linda reminded us last week Solomon established his Kingdom ultimately through the shedding of blood, the blood of his half brother and others. He has now finished building the Temple to house the Ark of the Covenant. Not only has he done this with slave labour but the construction is "gold, gold, gold, gold, gold." The stones are "costly, costly, costly." The accouterments--even the pans for the fire and the hinges on the doors--are "gold," "golden," and "pure gold."

As Walter Bruggerman says Solomon is showing off!

In today's reading we hear Solomon's prayer to God but we have this other reality behind the scene. Is this what Solomon's version of religion is about? Slave labour and egotism? Turning the worship of God and God's people into a commodity for personal egotistical ends? Later in this book we find out that Solomon's questionable policies have ripped the Kingdom apart. There is a massive mass walkout of 10 of the 12 tribes of Israel who go to establish a separate Kingdom. Jerusalem is eventually invaded and the costly golden temple is destroyed by the Babylonians. The Hebrews are once more taken

into captivity.

One of the stumbling blocks we come up against in following Jesus is religion itself and how it can be distorted for all types of questionable motives. We know it when we see it. Others who are not part of any religion certainly see it as well.

So we have all these stumbling blocks – some from inside ourselves, some that are inherent aspects of a religious life, some thrown in our way, some from our culture and some from the church itself getting things very wrong and some from the truth's that Jesus himself confronts us with.

Yet despite the inherent dangers in a religious life for those who know him well there is this bloke Jesus Christ. He has got "it". Vincent van Gogh wrote to one of his friends "*I am no friend of present-day Christianity, though its Founder was sublime*". Van Gogh recognized it as have countless others – Jesus has the words of eternal life. And where do we find those words?

Well in a church mostly, and I do not mean a building like this. I mean where two or more are gathered in the name of Jesus and where the story of his life, death and resurrection are told and retold. Where the words are brought alive once more that tell of Gods love, forgiveness and mercy. Where we are brought face to face with our humanity and wonders of wonders find healing from our doubts and hope for the future.

Where we find the possibility of abundant, whole, eternal life. It is such a pearl, such a treasure beyond price we are keep coming back, we stand firm against the challenges that beset us. We are in love so much with this life that we want to share the good news with others. Jesus shared his knowledge and gave his life for us in the first place so that we might have life abundantly. In following Jesus we are called to share that life with others. We will come across stumbling blocks but with Gods grace we keep on following – whom else would we turn too? – Jesus has the words of eternal life. - Amen

