

Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost - 2018

Bread by RS Thomas

Hunger was loneliness, betrayed
By the pitiless candour of the stars'
Talk, in an old byre he prayed

Not for food; to pray was to know
Waking from a dark dream to find
The white loaf on the white snow;

Not for warmth, warmth brought the rain's
Blurring of the essential point
Of ice probing his raw pain.

He prayed for love, love that would share
His rags' secret; rising he broke
Like sun crumbling the gold air

The live bread for the hungry folk.

.....for we are members of one another. We heard these words this morning from St Paul writing to the Ephesians. This theology of the Body is central to Paul's understanding of the community of faith. He is passionate about creating community from these rag tag groups. He reminds them: If one part of the body suffers, all the other parts suffer with it. Indeed Paul writes in 1 Corinthians that salvation itself rests on love of others: "if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. If I give away all I have, and if I deliver my body to be burned, but have not love, I gain nothing."

But we have a problem. We are increasingly becoming separated from one another. I read statistics recently that said more than 50% of the adult population are unmarried and over one-quarter of households consist of people living alone, and this rate is rising. There has been a huge decline in membership of organizations that traditionally brought meaning, purpose and social opportunities to people and their communities. And we can see this decline clearly in our churches, Trade Unions, Service Clubs and all manner of groups. I heard this week about 'hot desking.' If you work in an office environment you will not necessarily have your own desk. It is 'first in best dressed.' If there are no desks available you wait until one becomes free or work from home, or at the coffee shop, alone. Alongside this paradoxically has been a massive increase in the use of social media, and computer games and other related solitary pursuits. All this means less time socializing and more time alone. And of all the fantasies human beings entertain, the idea that we can go it alone is the most absurd and perhaps the most dangerous.

Research has consistently shown that social support and social ties protect our mental health and my attendance recently at a 'Mental Health First Aid' course has further strengthened my thinking about this difficult topic, one which has

become a front and centre health issue over the last thirty or so years. It is incredibly prevalent, the third largest disease burden in Australia after cancer and cardio vascular disease. One in five folk, 20% suffer from some kind of mental health issue. It isn't new, but our modern lifestyles seem to be working against our mental health.

There are many passages in the Bible that tell us to not be afraid, and not to worry. We are told to rejoice always. But where does that leave us when we struggle with anxiety or depression? What does it say about our faith if we find ourselves stuck in unhealthy thoughts and emotions? Mental health disorders strike at the core of what makes us, us, they make us question our identity. We doubt not only ourselves, but also our faith.

Today we experienced the prophet Elijah whose story has the potential to encourage us in matters of faith and mental illness and also to help others who may be struggling. Elijah falls into a deep depression after Jezebel swore to kill him for doing away with the prophets of Baal. The Hebrew text I am told is direct and bold in its language: 'Enough, now,' it begins, 'I want to end it!' But the response was not words, not even words of encouragement. We read that an angel touched him and said to him, "Get up and eat." And a second time, the angel touched him, and said, "Get up and eat, otherwise the journey will be too much for you." God lovingly gave him rest, broke the pattern of loneliness that threatened to overwhelm him and then fortified him for his next step (forty days of literal one-foot-in-front-of-the-other steps!) The story continues with Elijah complaining of his loneliness: 'I am the only one left,' but then realising that God is not out there distant, seemingly all-powerful, but is in the silence and in that voice within, this is his identity and his strength.

This wonderful story offers us in our community of faith some hints as to our role when we have folk in our midst whose mental health may be fragile. Few of us are trained practitioners but we all have a role to play. Our words although well-meant can often come up short. Perhaps rather than words we should and can offer a place of rest, a place where we can discover anew our identity, where we can find hospitality and communion. A place where those who suffer might find the nourishment to continue on. This is our calling and it is the stuff of our salvation.

Our gospel reading helps us further. Jesus is far more than just the child of that familiar couple from up the road. His uniqueness is mirrored by our own, recognizing this and drawing closer to Christ we become aware that partaking of the Eucharist binds each of us to God - indeed, places us *in* the body of Christ and in doing so, community is created. Embedded in this one body, we cannot neglect any part of it, any person. Paul reminded the Corinthians, "Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body." Being in the body of Christ is being *in* the communal body. If we fail in service to one another in care, patience, love, the body cannot know healing - and yes, salvation. 'Whoever eats of this bread will live forever; and the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh.' Amen.