

**St Philip's Anglican Church, O'Connor**

*The Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost—8 August 2021*

Revd Martin Johnson

1 Kings 19:4-8, Ps 34:1-8, Ephesians 4:25-5:2, John 6:35, 41-51.

*The God who satisfies*

When ministering alongside soldiers – predominantly young men, during my time as an Army Chaplain, I often sat with their anger. And as I explored their concerns more often than not their source was grief born out of loss. As very much a lay person in the area of psychology, my default position was always grief and loss, these things, it seemed to me, lay at the heart of most psychological problems. This causes me to dwell on the nature of God.

On Saturday next the Church commemorates the martyrs of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The Eucharist will be celebrated at Kankinya and we'll recall the lives of those who died for their faith during the 1900s. Many names are familiar, some not so: Grand Duchess Elizabeth of Russia, Maximilien Kolbe, Martin Luther King, Maria Skobtskova, Janani Luwum, Oscar Romero. One of the best known martyrs of the last century is Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who was executed by the Nazis in 1945 and commemorated on the date of his death 9 April.

I chose a hymn by Bonhoeffer for the 10am Eucharist this morning which I found quite profound and which has helped me in my reflections on the nature of God and on the cross, reflections given impetus by the 'Winter Journey' which some of us are on. (It is hymn #240 in hymnal).

All go to God when they are sorely placed,  
they plead to him for help, for peace, for bread,  
for mercy, for them sinning, sick or dead.  
We all do so in faith or unbelief.

We go to God when he is sorely placed,  
find him poor, scorned, unsheltered, without bread,  
whelmed under weight of evil, weak or dead.  
We stand by God then, in his hour of grief.

God comes to us when we are sorely placed,  
body and spirit feeds us with his bread.  
For everyone, he as a man hangs dead:  
forgiven life he gives all through his death.

I then reflected on the words of the collect this morning:

Grant, O Lord,  
that we may see in you the fulfilment of all our need,  
and may turn from every false satisfaction  
to feed on the true and living bread  
that you have given us in Jesus Christ.

This prayer 'collects up' our thinking and praying. Within it is that word, satisfaction. I have spoken about this before, but I won't mention Mick Jagger again and his inability to get satisfaction! That word has taken on a new life for many of us at present because of our 'Winter Journey.' We have been examining what it means for God to have been 'satisfied' by the death of Jesus. This idea in its various iterations has influenced our thinking about the cross of Christ for centuries, the cross 'satisfies' God. We have dishonoured God by our sin and Jesus satisfies God's anger in our stead. But as we have been discovering this is not the

full story. It is part of the story, we cannot discount the Biblical passages that speak of Jesus as the ‘propitiation’ for our sins, in other words the satisfaction for our sins. But as we dwelt on this during the week, we became increasingly aware of the elephant in the room! (We will discover other elephants but this is the first one)! We called it the problem of the ‘wrath of God!’ God’s wrath at our disobedience is ‘satisfied’ by the death of Jesus in this theory of atonement from the Middle Ages.

The problem with this of course is what image of God is created by this language. Because the image we have of God will be central to our spirituality, to our lives of prayer and worship and beyond these things to our world view and our personal ethics.

I found this arresting hymn, which was originally a poem, challenged those inherited images of God and potentially brought us closer to God. Dietrich Bonhoeffer was a German born pastor and teacher, latterly a theological lecturer in Berlin. His leadership in the Church and his assistance in helping Jewish people escape led to his execution. By then he was known in many countries through his study abroad, his ecumenical work, and ministry in England. But he is most widely revered for his *Letters and Papers from Prison* written while in Flossenbergl concentration camp. Here he writes of this hymn: ‘*Man is challenged to participate in the sufferings of God at the hands of a godless world ... It is not some religious act which makes a Christian what he is, but participation in the suffering of God in the life of the world*’. Extraordinary words given Bonhoeffer’s situation.

This God described by Bonhoeffer is not angry, wrathful, demanding of us satisfaction, but a grieving God, a God with us in our deepest need, when even life itself, as Elijah discovered, seems too hard. A God who far from being the Lord of all he surveys demanding satisfaction from the great unwashed, is indeed one of them. He is among the pilgrims, the poor, the dispossessed, the sinful, the sorrowing and the dead. He is their satisfaction.

All too often throughout the centuries our skewed image of God has been the source of incalculable harm. *Be imitators of God* says St Paul, which begs the question: which vision of God are we imitating? Paul’s call to the Ephesians not to grieve the Spirit of God reminds us of the very nature of God and how our actions impact not just those around us, but seeps into the divine —the God of Christ who is not wrathful but is a man of sorrows acquainted with grief. *Put away from you all bitterness and wrath and anger and wrangling and slander, together with all malice, and be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you*. This is the God we imitate.

Verse three of Bonhoeffer’s poem which we read: *body and spirit feeds us with his bread*. Is perhaps better translated from the German: ‘*satisfies*’ *body and soul with his bread* [*sättigt den Leib und die Seele mit seinem Brot*] As we continue to hear the words of the great ‘Bread of life’ discourse in John chapter 6 we are reminded of the nature of this God, the God who feeds us and not only us, this bread is for the life of the world. The God who comes to us, and whom we approach empty handed is the one who satisfies. We need to hold in this lively dialectic the God whom in Christ we satisfy, alongside the God who satisfies us. May we indeed turn from all false satisfaction, O taste and see that the Lord is good. Amen.