

Sermon – Sunday 19th August 2018 – 9.30 am

As many of you know, I was lucky enough to have the opportunity to help the chaplaincy team for one day of Royal Ascot week in June. While I was walking around the various enclosures, there was one question that I got asked with astonishing regularity. Time and again, I was handed race cards and asked who would win. Somehow in people's heads, the fact that I clearly have a faith and worship God – I was wearing my clerical collar throughout the day – appeared to mean that I might have an insight into which horse would win a race.

Now, I'm not going to take any of this too seriously. There was plenty of drink flowing and people were keen to find ways to engage in conversation. This was a light-hearted approach rather than a well thought through belief. But for me this was something I simply hadn't envisaged. There is nothing in the faith I seek to live out that would give me power to predict winning horses at Ascot. And the fact that this was an ongoing conversation on that day inevitably left me asking searching questions about the faith I do espouse – and why these ideas jarred.

As you have probably noticed, for the last few weeks, the gospel readings have been focusing on Jesus as the bread of life. In this morning's reading, it is that notion of "life" that comes into sharp focus. That focus on life has enabled me to return to those questions that were raised at Ascot and start to unpick what kind of life it is that we live as followers of Christ – and why, for me, that does not look like having a sixth sense for the racing selections.

For those of you who were here last week, we spent some time considering why it was that Jesus might use the analogy of bread. The focus this morning is far more strongly on the consequences of Jesus being that bread. On what it means to be followers of Jesus – to feed on him; to allow him to abide in us. As we go about our daily lives, we don't spend a great deal of time thinking about the fact that our porridge has given us the energy to take the dog for a walk; or the ham salad at lunch time was just the ticket for an afternoon of shopping. But feeding on the bread of life is different. It changes the nature of our lives. The quality of everything we say and do is shaped by our connection with Christ. Or at least that's the aspiration – that's what we are called to.

When Jesus refers to eternal life, it is easy to think that he is talking about the hereafter – that somehow we are seeking to pave our way to heaven. But that's not actually what he says. His words are: "Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood have eternal life." That's present tense. That's now. Eternal life isn't just about something in the future – it's not about a reward for good behaviour after our earthly life is complete. Eternal life is a possibility here and now. It is a possibility opened up to us by feeding on the bread of life.

I wonder what that might actually mean for us today. I wonder what it means that eternal life is a present possibility – I wonder what it means for us to experience eternal life. What is the quality of that life? Why is it something that Jesus believes to be essential?

Do you remember Jesus's words later in John's gospel: "I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly." There must be something about the nature of eternal life that is abundant – somehow it is about feeling fully alive. So as we consider those times when we may have connected with the life of which Jesus speaks, there must be something important about remembering those occasions when we have felt the most fully alive. I wonder what those might be for you?

Of course we know well enough that being followers of Christ, that seeking to live the eternal life of which Jesus speaks, is not a guarantee against pain or challenge. Jesus's own life is testimony to that. But there is a quality to the life of which he speaks that involves wholeness.

Most of you know that my previous career was as a secondary school teacher. You will be familiar with league tables which assess the performance of schools according to the exam results their students achieve – the most significant number for us as an 11-16 state comprehensive at the time I was teaching was the percentage of students achieving 5 or more GCSE results at grade A* to C, including English and Maths. Now the thing is, that percentage matters. It matters because each individual pupil matters, and they should all be encouraged and nurtured to achieve the best results they can. It matters because parents won't send their children to the school unless the school is perceived to be good.

The thing is, though, setting targets can lead us in peculiar directions. For example, does it matter more that certain children are encouraged and nurtured towards a C grade, than that others are similarly supported to achieve a D grade, which represents their full potential? Are a child's exam results more important than, for example, their emotional and mental health and wellbeing?

When and where I was teaching, there was never a question of performance related pay. But once that possibility is raised, does it skew the focus of teachers more strongly towards exam performance than the wholeness of the children they teach? There were times in my teaching career that I found myself asking searching questions about what I was doing; what I was being asked to do; what I believed I should be doing.

And it is my belief that in that messy place of trying to find the path we walk in our lives – personal and professional – is where we are constantly seeking to connect with what Jesus calls eternal life. So at those times when we are, for example, exercised by organisational demands, and questioning whether they are good for people either within the organisation, or those served by it – when we ask difficult questions – when we might dare to stand up and be counted. That is where we are engaging in the search for eternal life.

At the heart of the quest must be prayer. We must be constantly seeking guidance from God in the decisions we take. At its heart is also the Eucharist – our coming together to break bread and to feed on the living bread in word and sacrament. Probably at its heart is also the willingness to listen to others. To allow ourselves to be challenged as well as supported.

The life we are called to is not always straightforward. There are plenty of models and ideas of how to live that can feel compelling, that can be hard to avoid – from blinkered ideas of success to the latest search for happiness. But they are not life. Or at least they are not real life, because their foundation is not the living bread, and their rewards are finite and temporary. To truly live is to allow ourselves to be fed by Christ; to walk in his footsteps; to share his values. We will fail along the way. But we do not travel alone. And it is a life of truth, hope and abundance.

Amen