

Come and Eat

Elijah in the Desert

There's a story in the Old Testament about the prophet Elijah. He has survived the greatest crisis of his life: an encounter with the prophets of Baal on Mount Carmel. A great drought over Israel has come to an end, but Elijah is now exhausted, and his life is in danger.

So he flees into the wilderness and comes to sit down under a solitary broom tree, the only place where there is shade. Elijah has completely come to the end of his own resources.

He asked that he might die: "It is enough; now, O Lord, take away my life, for I am no better than my ancestors."

Later in the story, the Lord will lead him up a mountain and send an earthquake, wind and fire, and then a still, small voice, and renew his faith and calling. But that's not the first thing that happens to this exhausted prophet who has come to the end of his strength.

This is the first thing, according to 1 Kings 19:

"Then Elijah lay down under the broom tree and fell asleep. Suddenly an angel touched him and said to him, "Get up and eat". He looked, and there at his head was a cake, baked on hot stones, and a jar of water. He ate and drank and lay down again. The angel of the Lord came a second time, touched him and said: "Get up and eat, otherwise the journey will be too much for you". He got up, ate and drank; then he went, in the strength of that food, forty days and forty nights to Horeb, the mount of God." (1 Kings 19.4-8).

Welcome to this short series of podcasts on the theme of Holy Communion, the profound and wonderful meal which is at the heart of Christian worship. We are now coming to the end of a long period in which most of us have not been able to worship in person for much of the time. As a Christian community, we have lost some of our core disciplines which sustain us in our faith and life.

There has been immense creativity in our online worship, and I am hugely thankful for all the skill and dedication poured into that. During lockdown, my normal Sunday practice was to be with Ann in our home connecting to our diocesan service, Church at Home, in my slippers and with a cup of coffee. And I've enjoyed immensely the carefully prepared worship and talks and prayers from all across the diocese.

I've missed singing with a congregation, even though I struggle to hold a tune. I've missed the beauty and peace of our church buildings. And of course I've missed talking with and meeting a wide range of people. Most of all I've missed sharing in Holy Communion. That's why as we regather, I want to focus again in these podcasts on the Eucharist and on resetting our sacramental life. The title for the series, Come and Eat, is taken from the invitation Jesus gives to his disciples in John 21, by the lakeside. These podcasts will all explore different sections of John 6, which begins with the feeding of the five thousand.

But my overall starting point, the lens through which I want to approach holy communion, is this story of Elijah in 1 Kings 19: the exhausted prophet, fleeing into the desert, right at the end of his resources.

Because that, I guess, is where we are. The pandemic has stretched us beyond what we thought we could endure and then has stretched us some more. We are very tired now. Many of us have given out as much as we can in our workplaces or to our families or in church. Some of us will feel forgotten and overlooked. Many are grieving, some are sick. The costs on our children and especially our young people has been too high. The financial challenges seem acute; jobs and businesses have been lost. There is so much rebuilding to be done, but so little energy to face the new challenges.

Yes we are full of hope. Yes we see the progress brought by the vaccines. Yes it is wonderful to begin to gather again in person and to restart many aspects of church life and community service. But if we are honest we are simply tired and worn down and need a holiday and every day is quite hard.

That makes this particular moment one of jeopardy. Like all of the other stages of the journey, we need to understand it in the right way and realise where we are. Which is where this story of Elijah is so very helpful.

The Lord meets Elijah where he is in the wilderness. He doesn't attempt to cheer him up. He doesn't talk much. He doesn't burden him with tasks or big visions of the future. He doesn't spend time analysing Elijah's sermon on Mount Carmel to tell him how it could be improved.

The Lord, through his angel, simply sees what is needed. The Lord prepares a meal: fresh bread, cool, clear fresh water in a jar. Time to rest and sleep. Elijah eats, drinks and rests. Still it's not enough. Eat, drink, rest, repeat, to coin a phrase. Only then does the journey continue: forty days and forty nights.

The Eucharist is a meal for tired, hungry people. The meal is offered and prepared by the Lord who is our host. We are the pilgrims travelling through the wilderness. He spreads a table before us and anoints our heads with oil, to quote Psalm 23. Jesus is our host. I am the guest, often unkind and ungrateful, to echo George Herbert's poem. I come hesitantly. My soul draws back from love's invitation. I look around for a guest more worthy to be here. But love persists.

And the Elijah story is the frame for understanding the feeding of the five thousand. At the beginning of John 6 a great crowd follows Jesus. The crowd will grow some more during the chapter and then ebb away to nothing: they are indeed unkind, ungrateful. But they are also harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. This is the same crowd on whom Jesus looks with compassion in Matthew's gospel, because they have so many needs.

We somehow love the story of the feeding of the five thousand in the wilderness, especially as John tells it. Jesus is the host. We love the detail of the small boy who offers what he has.

We love the care taken in gathering up the fragments of the meal, of the abundance of grass in the place. We love the playful questioning of the disciples: 'you give them something to eat.' We love the seriousness of Philip's reply: 'Six months wages would not buy enough bread for each of them to get a little.' Every minister who looks on a crowd who are spiritually hungry would do well to remember that we lack the resources to feed them ourselves.

Most of all we learn to love the truth that this is a eucharistic story, a foreshadowing of Holy Communion. For John does not include the institution of Holy Communion in his account of the upper room. He is writing for a community which has the other three gospels and know that story. John writes of the foot washing in that place: of the Lord who comes to serve and commands us to serve and love one another.

And instead, he writes here, indirectly in John 6, of the eucharist:

"Then Jesus took the loaves, and when he had given thanks, he distributed them to those who were seated; also the fish as much as they wanted".

This is the Lord who comes to serve and feed his people in the desert, when they are harassed and helpless. At the heart of every Eucharist, we take bread and give thanks, we break it and give it, these four actions: we take, we give thanks, we break, we share holy communion.

A few verses later, John describes this grassy place with the words: 'the place where they had eaten the bread after the Lord had given thanks' – the word for thanks is eucharisto. There is a deep continuity therefore between the God of the Old Testament, who feeds his people in the desert, including Moses and Elijah, and the Jesus, the Lord who feeds the unkind and ungrateful crowds by Galilee, and a continuity from there to the last supper. There is a continuity from all of this to my own visit to my parish church at the end of lockdown, tired and distracted as I am, and coming forward to receive the host or the broken bread in my own wilderness journey.

It is the Lord who invites me to come. The Lord bids me welcome. The Lord is feeding me in this sacrament, received through faith, and nourishing me by his body and blood. The Lord is meeting me here as in no other place, in ways which are beyond understanding, sharing God's very presence and self, and entering deep within me.

All of this might give us a frame to us over the coming weeks and months when we are so tired and there remains so much to be done. It will be very easy not to set a priority on returning to Church and receiving Holy Communion. Clergy have an advantage here over the laity because we are expected to be present as part of our role. Our habits are set for us; whether we are in parish ministry or chaplaincy, whether we feel like going to church or not, we have an obligation to be there.

But for the laity, the whole people of God, it may be harder than we think to reset our disciplines of worship. Most of us have undoubtedly been sustained by worship online. In

many ways it is easier as well as sometimes safer to surf from our sofas on Sundays. Can we perhaps be more flexible again now?

Christ offers a touching place in the sacrament of holy communion – an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace. I want to encourage you in this time and season, as much as you can, to come to this rendezvous, this meeting, to put yourself in the way of God's grace: to come and eat. I want to encourage you to rebuild the discipline and expectation of setting aside time on a Sunday, on the first day of the week, to respond to the Lord's invitation to gather around his table, and if you can, to do so physically. I want to encourage careful and prayerful preparation for receiving the sacrament, so we all make the most of this meeting. And I want to encourage the meeting together, as it is allowed again, not only with the Lord but with the Lord's people, to recover the sense that the Lord asks us to do this: to take bread, to give thanks, to break it and share it, and that this is the centre of our lives, our meeting place with the divine.

It may not be easy to reset these disciplines which have sustained the Church over two thousand years. It can be as hard to form a good habit again as it is to give up a bad one. But this putting ourselves in the way of grace is vital if we are to be strengthened and built up, spiritually as well as physically, in this season, and if we are reform and regather the church in every place across the diocese.

I have always found the physical discipline of making the journey from my place in church to receive Communion to be a very powerful one. I prefer to receive kneeling, if that is possible. It is good to stretch out empty hands. All of these things remind me that I am coming to God not full of myself and my achievements but in great need of grace and poor in Spirit. I cannot do any of what I am called to do with my own resources. I need the Lord to feed me, to sustain me, to bring water to this desert place, this dry heart, to build me up again. Only then am I able to rise to the challenges life sends me and to carry the life God gives into the wider world.

So hear the invitation. Come deeper into the mystery of God's love, the God who draws near to feed and sustain us, when we come to the end of ourselves, and come and eat.

I end with one of the most precious prayers from our common worship service of holy communion.

Most merciful Lord,
Your love compels us to come in,
Our hands were unclean,
Our hearts were unprepared,
We were not fit even to eat the crumbs from under your table.
But you Lord are the God of our salvation,
And share your bread with sinners.
So cleanse and feed us with the precious body and blood of your son
That he may live in us, and we in him.
And that we, with the whole company of Christ,
May sit and eat in your kingdom.

Amen.