Sermon for 18th in Ordinary Time Year B

Readings: Exodus 16:2-4, 9-15; John 6:24-35

Where does the ocean begin? And where does it end? If I could swim forever, I could walk into the water at Takapuna and leave the harbour and be out into the Pacific, but at some point it would become the Tasman, and then at some point the Southern Ocean and then the Indian Ocean, and then the Atlantic and through the English Channel and I could swim up the river Humber and Trent and get out within a mile of my mum’s house in Gainsborough, or swim a bit further and get out within a mile of our house in Derby.

In order to cope with life we cut things up into manageable chunks and stick labels on them, but many such boundaries and labels are purely arbitrary. We often divide the indivisible and thereby lose sight of the whole picture. The water that licks at my feet on Takapuna beach may have flowed out to sea through Derby city centre.

We are all body, mind and spirit, but just how many humans have their beings ripped apart by false divisions? There are those who satisfy only the body; gluttony is not just about food, but about gorging on the things of this world to such an excess that it takes over the mind and dulls the spirit. Materialism has never been as rampant as it is today, because we have never had so many people in the world with such easy access to so much.

Then we have those who think that by controlling the mind they can safely ignore the requirements of the body and the spirit. North Korea with its insane leadership cult and its frighteningly perfect precision of its military parades tries to control how everyone thinks whilst its citizens starve to death of hunger.

And then we have those fanatics who think they can so stuff people’s heads with things of the spirit that they can then discount the legitimate needs of the body and the mind. Such is the strategy of those who recruit the Islamist suicide bombers.

The Manna of Exodus 16 is just another version of the story of Genesis 3. Just as Adam and Eve could not accept that the apple held any other value than the physical delight to eat its flesh, so too the Israelites could not hold together the God who rescued them from Pharaoh with the God who could take care of them in the desert.

Will they accept the Manna as bread from heaven, or will they just take it as food for their bellies? Miraculous bread in the middle of the desert might have given them a head start on seeing its spiritual significance – namely – that they can trust God to get them safely to the Promised Land – but by Exodus 32 they have built a golden calf and bent down and worshipped it.

Now I get as frustrated as anyone when pious people resort to simplistic clichés to announce that “God will provide” and then sit back and wait for the miracle to arrive rather than roll their sleeves up and play their part, especially when they are saying it to put pressure on those to whom they are speaking to cough up the miracle they desire.

Yet all of us are guilty of dividing the indivisible and living our lives in separate compartments. Wesley’s HOLINESS was intended to hold all of life together so that the faith we sing on Sunday permeates our life the rest of the week – how we earn and spend and save our money, how we treat our employees and work colleagues, spouse, children, and strangers; how we use the resources of the earth and care for our bodies.

For example: Should any Methodist ever take recreational drugs? Or ever get drunk? What about smoking???

The trouble is that once we try to specify the details, we can soon degenerate into a self -righteous moralism and we become better known for not drinking or gambling than ever we do for anything we might have to say about God. How do we challenge people to consider the moral values of their lives without appearing to be pious party-poopers?

In **John 6**, Jesus is still struggling with exactly the same human frailty as Moses was in Exodus: the tendency to see only the worldly significance of something and ignore the spiritual.

The crowds wanted Jesus just for a good feed. Yet for Jesus, the physical bread was important not just because they were genuinely hungry in the wilderness and needed food, but because it had an equally important spiritual significance that should have pointed beyond itself to the Bread of Life itself.

True Christianity, as exemplified in the Celtic and Franciscan traditions, sees the whole world as sacramental in the broadest sense. The whole world is not an end in itself, nor is earthly life an end in itself. Our earthly life is the vehicle to propel us to eternal life. The true measure of our earthly life is whether it has succeeded in that supreme purpose. Has our earthly life gained enough spiritual momentum to propel us across the chasm of death? That is the question.

All that is in this world points beyond itself to the spiritual world beyond. This does NOT mean that the things of this world are without value – just that they are not the TOTALITY of what is and is to be.

Therefore, what does it profit a person to gain the whole world and forfeit their soul?

**Rev Dr Trevor Hoggard**

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