Sermon for 19th in Ordinary Year B

Readings: 2 Samuel 18:5-9, 15, 31-33; John 6:35, 41-51

i

David divided his army into 3 corps – each with their own commander, Joab, Abishai or Ittai. They marched out to face Absalom’s revolt against his father, David.

Absalom was the 3rd son of King David by one of his wives called Maccah. He had inherited his father’s beautiful eyes and good looks and was known as the most handsome man in the kingdom. Absalom was beautiful, but he was vain. He rejoiced in his father’s favour and his royal status – he even had 50 men employed to run before him to announce his impending arrival at any place. He also feigned obsequious submission to foreign and noble visitors to his father’s palace in order to manipulate them into his influence and set them against his father.

Absalom’s full-blood sister Tamar, however, was raped on one occasion by their own half-brother, Amnon, an eldest son of David by another of his wives. Absalom later killed Amnon and marched his forces against his father in Jerusalem. David initially fled across the Jordan to the east, where he regrouped and came back to face the revolt with his own army comprising 3 corps of troops.

In today’s reading we hear David instruct his corps commanders to spare Absalom’s life and take him captive, but in the battle of Ephraim Wood Absalom gets caught by his neck in the forked branch of a tree and hangs helplessly in the air until Joab, despite David’s express command, kills him.

Joab was a political realist; he knew that David would never be secure on his throne as long as Absalom lived. David, however, was torn between the dual roles of king and father. As king, the only solution was to crush Absalom’s rebellion and Absalom with it; as a father, David wanted to save his son. Joab resolved the crisis for him by taking matters into his own dispassionate hands.

David was devastated at the news of Absalom’s death. He never did get to choose between the role of king and father, but his hope was to try to honour both. Joab probably judged correctly that such a compromise would have led to ultimate disaster. “Oh my son, Absalom”, wept David, “If only I had died instead of you!”

To Christian ears there is an echo of another, cosmic drama in this story. It reminds us of how God was torn between his role as king/judge and father. As king, or sovereign of creation God has to be offended by the rebellion of Adam and Eve and the loss of humankind from the intimacy of the Garden of Eden. God cannot simply ignore sin. Yet as a loving father, God naturally wants to save his children.

Unlike David, God did get to make his choice and he did succeed in honouring both roles; as king and judge God declared the unacceptability of sin and evil on the cross; as father he saved his children from the consequences of their own foolishness by dying himself for them in Christ and rising to bring them eternal life.

ii

This is the proclamation we hear toady in the gospel reading from John 6, This passage is of immense comfort, inspiration and hope to those who believe; but to the non-Christian it is the unsurmountable metaphysical obstacle that no other religion puts in the way; it is the gate of absolute uncompromising allegiance to Jesus through which non-believers will not pass to enter the kingdom of heaven; it is the blind alley for those who wish to see Jesus as simply a moral teacher from whom they can take the bits they like and leave the rest; it is the end of the line for those hoping to add Christian faith to the general eclectic post-modern smorgasbord of pick-your-own spirituality.

In other words, you will either love or hate a passage such as today’s gospel.

Jesus uses the story of manna in the wilderness from Exodus 16 to contrast who he is in comparison to the greatest leader of the Jewish faith, Moses.

Jesus claims to be the bread of life. In an age when bread formed 50% of the average diet, clearly bread was a matter of life and death. Yet this phrase is obviously intended metaphorically too. He is the bread ‘from above’ or ‘from heaven’ where God resides. This is the first of 7 ‘I AM’ sayings in John’s gospel in which Jesus claims divine origin, authority and power.

Looking first to the heavenly origin to which Jesus lays claim, we hear Jesus claim to be ‘the bread that came down from heaven’ which means Jesus is the one who can now keep people alive with God’s special provision of life for his lost and wandering children. To some, this is an outrageous claim, or to others simply mystifying when they know his parents, Joseph and Mary. But this is the kernel of the dilemma. Is Jesus just another earthly moral teacher or does he rank above all others?

Is Jesus unique in his relationship to God and the meaning of life? There is no dodging this question and there is no fudging either. To decide one way makes you a Christian; to decide the other way puts you outside the historic boundaries of the Christian Church and at best leaves you as a Christian humanist who attends a church, whatever you may think you are.

There has been a tendency over the twentieth century for some people to try to remove this ‘unsurmountable metaphysical obstacle’ to Christian faith in order to make Jesus more accessible to a sceptical western world which has lost faith in all metaphysics, but individual agnosticism does not redraw the historic boundaries of Christian faith as recorded in scripture and endorsed in the historic creeds of the Church.

Whilst everyone is welcome to attend church, whatever amount of faith and understanding they have, Christian religion does not just reshape itself to fit with the predilections of a particular culture or class at a given moment in time.

Looking secondly to Jesus’ claim of divine authority, we hear in this passage how Jesus says everyone who comes to him in faith is being led by God the Father. He quotes the prophets who foretold that God himself would one day teach the people and thereby claims his words are in fact God’s words to the world. Indeed, ‘everyone who listens to the Father…comes to me’ (v45). Only Jesus among all people ever born has seen God and to believe this is the way to have eternal life. This truly is a narrow gate of absolute allegiance to Christ alone.

Recent generations have again wished that this gate was wider and less exclusive and thankfully most Christians have moved away from old style Christian-imperialism which assumed everything beyond Christianity was pagan darkness that had to be eradicated. Whilst many now freely acknowledge the prevenient work of the Holy Spirit who expresses the truth and love of God the Father in many religions and spiritual traditions of the world, the ecumenical Christian consensus continues to be that only that which conforms to the image of God as revealed in the humble, pure and loving Jesus of Nazareth is fit to enter the kingdom of God.

In this sense, Christ remains uniquely authoritative as the full and unique revelation of God upon earth.

Looking thirdly to the power Jesus claims in this first of the ‘I AM’ sayings, we hear Jesus claim that the reason belief in him as the unique Word from the Father, the only one to whom the Father directs those who are prepared to listen, is that eternal life depends upon it.

As I said, this is the ‘blind alley for those who for those who wish to see Jesus as simply a moral teacher from whom they can take the bits they like and leave the rest; it is the end of the line for those hoping to add Christian faith to the general eclectic post-modern smorgasbord of pick-your-own spirituality’.

I do not mean to argue the old style exclusive gospel that deems all people beyond the Church are irredeemably lost; but I do wish to argue that conformity to the values of kingdom of God as revealed in Jesus Christ is the only path that leads to eternal life. I acknowledge this is going too far for those Christians who believe an explicit affirmation of faith is the only way for salvation, but as a Methodist I take a wider view of the prevenient grace of God at work in the world among those to whom God sent Christ for the sole purpose of gathering in as many of God’s lost children as possible. It is because Jesus has revealed what is necessary for eternal life and is also the unique and ultimate source of eternal life that Jesus will always play a central role in the salvation of the world. ‘If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever. This bread is my flesh, which I will give for the life of the world’.