

19th Sunday of Ordinary Time

John 6.41ff

In the year 1831, an undergraduate at Exeter College was baptized in this church. Today, that would be unremarkable. In 1831, it was a striking occurrence because the University of Oxford was so closely woven into the Church of England that to find an unbaptized undergraduate was extremely rare. Strangely, in this case, the undergraduate concerned had actually been baptized as a baby, but he underwent Anglican baptism because he was repudiating the faith of his father, who was a Unitarian minister. The Unitarian Church denies the doctrine of the Trinity, and therefore, according to the official teaching of the time, its baptism – even if it used the words Father, Son and Holy Spirit – could not suffice.

This undergraduate was called Frederick Denison Maurice and he would go on to become one of the

leading Christian thinkers of the nineteenth century. Indeed, Maurice is perhaps among the three most important British theologians of the 1800s, along with Samuel Taylor Coleridge and John Henry Newman. Coleridge was the son of a vicar but moved away from orthodox Anglicanism, and Newman famously converted to Roman Catholicism. Maurice moved the other way. He had in fact already had an undergraduate career at Cambridge, but refused to subscribe to the Thirty Nine articles and therefore could not take his degree. His coming to see the light is doubly displayed, for he both accepted the truth of Christian orthodoxy, and moved from Cambridge to Oxford.

Controversy was never far away, however. Maurice was an intellectual pioneer of Christian socialism in this country, and he was also considered a dangerously radical theologian, losing a position at Kings College London when he dared to argue that the phrase “eternal life” in the New Testament, and especially in John, did not refer to something of unending duration. In other

words, eternal life, Maurice felt, had nothing to do with time. This began a celebrated Victorian theological controversy in which Oxford's hero Dr Pusey was, as all too frequently, on the wrong side.

It was Maurice who was right. In our gospel reading, we heard Jesus say "Truly, truly, I say to you, he who believes has eternal life", and what characterizes the life which Jesus offers his listeners is not length of time. Eternal life is a different sort of life, a different order of life, we might say, to which all can attain but only because they are given that life and sustained in it by the one who has come into the world to draw all people to himself.

At the beginning of our gospel passage, we encountered the muttering and grumbling of those who have known Jesus for a long time. Presumably Galileans, they point to the fact that they know Jesus' parents. John has them name his father – Joseph. Whilst the neighbours refer to Jesus' father as Joseph, Jesus himself answers

them by talking of his true father, the one who sent him. Last week we saw the close connections between John's narratives and those of the Book of Exodus – the people murmur against Moses, complaining that they have been brought out into the wilderness to die. Here in this wilderness Jesus feeds the hungry and promises true life, but the people don't stop muttering.

The reluctance of the locals to accept that the boy they have seen grow up might have been entrusted with a divine mission is not surprising. We are uncomfortable with the notion that God might be an ordinary man, might do ordinary things. But it's essential to Christian teaching that Jesus was, in that sense, ordinary. Not a magician who appeared from nowhere, not a mythical half man half God, sired by Zeus or some such divinity. But an ordinary Galilean with a family, friends and neighbours.

Jesus silences their complaints. He has been sent by the Father, and it is the Father who is at work in him. At

the beginning of chapter six, we saw Jesus feed the crowds, and they follow him persistently. But they have not understood - they seek him because they ate their fill, not because they saw the signs. Again and again in John's gospel people are witnesses to things they do not truly perceive. Here Jesus makes it clear that it is the gift of the Father truly to see and truly to know that Jesus is the one whom he has sent. To see and to know all this, truly to believe, is to have eternal life.

Life might seem an odd thing to offer people, it being one of the few things which they undeniably already have. This oddity should alert us to Maurice's point: this is not ordinary life. All life is the gift of the creator. From the breathing of life into the nostrils of the first humans, the outpouring of the Spirit has been the basis of all that has life and breath. But Jesus reminds us that creation is a continuous activity – at every second of our existence we are created and sustained by God. The stories of the Passover and the manna to which we alluded make this point, as does the tale we heard in

our first reading Elijah, the fierce and lone defender of the Lord as Israel's only God, is chased across that same wilderness by fear and the thought of failure, and falls to the ground in defeat – I am no better than my ancestors – but again God provides, God raises him up, God does great things for him and through him.

Now the gift of life comes from a man. Jesus is the bread of life. Jesus is that which sustains the new life which the Father is giving to all who believe in him. And that life is rooted in his death: the bread which I will give for the life of the world is my flesh. We really need the passage to go further, because it is clear not only that Jesus death is the source of the new and eternal life which God gives, but that the bread of life which he offers is not something restricted to the past. Two verses after we finish, we read the words “unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you.” The eucharist is the story of Jesus, lived and told in the present, not the past.

Christ gives his life unto death, and is raised by God to new life, a life into which we are drawn and sustained by the Spirit of life, and by the bread of life. This bread, received in this eucharist is the eternal life which Christ offers, and it is nothing less than the life of God, our sharing in the perfect offering of love which Christ made in obedience to his Father's mission. When Maurice denied that eternal life was life for a very long time he was, in part, stating the obvious. But he was also making the important acknowledgement that life in Christ goes beyond not just our expectation but our comprehension. We can mutter and grumble, like Jesus own neighbours, that we don't understand. Or we can try truly to live and believe in the one sent to give us life in all its fullness.