

‘Manna Complex’

John 6:35 *“Then Jesus declared, “I am the bread of life. They who come to me will never go hungry, and they who believe in me will never be thirsty.””*

Recently, Emma and I went to our first Comedy Night at the MAC and saw two comedians who were trying out their acts before going to the ‘Fridge’ at the Edinburgh Festival. The first turn called himself an ‘Anarchist Chef’ and he produced a 3 course meal in the space of an hour using a kettle, an iron and a trouser-press!

The second act attempted to be satirical but ended up being an embarrassment. At one point a women in the audience started to heckle him, which was a great relief to the rest of us because her comments were funnier than his whole routine. Although we were told on several occasions that he wasn’t religious, about a third of his material referred to God and Jesus – which was intriguing. At one point he declared that what he disliked about Jesus was his ‘Messiah Complex’, which I guess was supposed to be funny, but it made me think: does this actually ring true of the Jesus we know? So I turn to the source of all current knowledge about life and the universe - Wikipedia!:

“A messiah complex (also known as the Christ complex or saviour complex) is a state of mind in which an individual holds a belief that they are, or are destined to become, a saviour.

The term "messiah complex" . . . is not a clinical term nor diagnosable disorder, however, the symptoms of the disorder closely resemble those found in individuals suffering from grandiose delusions or delusions of grandeur . . . When a messiah complex is manifested within a religious individual after a visit to Jerusalem, it may be identified as a psychosis known as Jerusalem syndrome."

Of course, such a definition is based on knowledge of the life and ministry of Jesus, which people have related to in their different states of being. But does this term resonate with the man, himself?

So we turn to the Gospel reading, John 6. (John's Gospel was the last of the New Testament Gospels to be composed, some 70 years after the events it describes, so the accounts are told with hindsight of several generations of Christian experience.) Today's Gospel reading tells of a conversation which took place after two miraculous occurrences: Feeding of the 5,000 and Walking on Water, when an astonished crowd followed Jesus to the other side of the Sea of Galilee. Jesus realises that their interest in him is because they have been dazzled by his ability to Wow and of course his catering skills, so he says to them, *"Do not work for food that spoils, but for food that endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you."* But the crowd want more convincing and demand signs and wonders, *"What will you do? Our forefathers ate manna in the desert: as it is written, 'He gave them bread from heaven to eat.'"*

Just as the community of John's Gospel remembered the stories of Jesus over three generations, so the crowd by the lakeside cast their communal memory back centuries to recall Moses leading their ancestors away from persecution, through the desert, to freedom. At one of the lowest points in their 40 year trek the Israelites were starving and began to question why they had left the security of Egypt, where, although enslaved, they had food to eat. Their leader, Moses, promised that God would not abandon them in their time of need; that God was true and faithful; that God would provide.

The word 'manna' derives from a question 'What is it?' – a question that has not been answered to everyone's satisfaction. Some claim that what the People of Israel discovered as a food source in the wilderness were seeds, or an edible grass, or a type of mushroom. But whatever manna was, it was seen as a sign of God's truth and faithfulness, God's commitment and constant love – that God does provide, abundantly.

To say God provides sounds rather glib these days when we place our faith in human ability to address all our wants and needs. But if we hold to the belief that God is Creator and Sustainer of all life, then all there is comes from that one Source. In the words of the Nicene Creed, *"the maker of heaven and earth, of all that is, seen and unseen."*

Jesus reminds the crowd of this understanding, *"it is my Father who gives you the true bread from heaven. For the bread of God is he who comes down from heaven and gives*

life to the world.” And when the crowd ask to be given such bread, Jesus replies, “I am the bread of life.”

Whether this is a ‘Messiah Complex’ is the wrong question here. The issue for the crowd that day, for the Christian community recalling the event generations later, and for us today, is what sort of Messiah are we dealing with? And the answer is, here was a man who did believe that he was God’s gift to the world, but not out of delusions of grandeur or a massive ego trip. Quite the opposite, in fact. For here is someone with what could be labelled as a ‘manna complex’ - that he was a sign of God’s abundant provision, a sign of God’s commitment and constant love to those in the wilderness of life; the One whose self-giving is to feed a hungry people; here is the Bread of Life - the Gift from God.

In his final writings from a prison cell in Nazi Germany, the theologian and activist Dietrich Bonhoeffer described Jesus as the ‘Man for Others’: *The experience that a transformation of all human life is given in the fact that "Jesus is there only for others." His "being there for others" is the experience of transcendence. It is only this "being there for others," maintained till death, that is the ground of his omnipotence, omniscience, and omnipresence. Faith is participation in this being of Jesus (incarnation, cross, resurrection). And then, echoing the words of Paul in the Letter to the Ephesians, Bonhoeffer considers nature of the Body of Christ: The church is the church only when it exists for others...The church must share in the secular problems of ordinary human life, not dominating, but helping and serving. It must tell men of*

every calling, what it means to live in Christ, to exist for others. In other words, Bonhoeffer reminds us that we are called to be a Manna People, the signs of God's abundant provision, who live as gifts from God.

As the people of The Church at Carrs Lane we look ahead at opportunities to extend our mission and ministry here in Birmingham city centre. We are considering who will be our partners in the opening up of Dale House as accommodation for vulnerable people. We look forward to the arrival of an new member of the ministry team, Deacon Ruth Yorke, who will dedicate time to develop a helpdesk service in the church centre. We continue to be faithful to our motto as an ecumenical congregation, 'United in Jesus – Serving the City', as we look to the future as signs of God's abundant provision in this place and at this time – a time of austerity and welfare cuts, of a growing refugee crisis, of hungry people in the wilderness. So, we are called to be a Manna People who follow Jesus, the Bread of Life – the Gift from God.

An easy jibe is to talk about the 'Messiah Complex' of Jesus; a harder task is to recall his true nature and then to walk in his Way as his family, the Church – because together we are the Body of Christ who live out his words today:

"I am the bread of life. They who come to me will never go hungry, and they who believe in me will never be thirsty."

Neil Johnson (2nd August 2015)