

Sermon for Sunday 28 July 2024 – The Ninth Sunday after Trinity

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2 Kings 4.42-44; Psalm 145.10-19; Ephesians 3.14-21; John 6.1-21

In the name of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen. Please be seated.

So, last week, Graham spoke about our going out and he spoke to us about what it means to go in peace, to love and serve the Lord. So this week I want to speak about our coming in. What is it that draws us together? So it says in Psalm 121, 'The Lord shall preserve thy going out and thy coming in from this time forth and even for evermore.' So, going out and coming in; I thought about going out and coming in, I thought about going on a journey, which immediately, of course, made me think about going on a long train journey; it did me, anyway.

And if you remember going on a long train journey, the point is to reach our destination, the point of our arrival. So if you've been on a long train journey, looking forward to your point of arrival, I guess there's a likelihood that at some point on your journey, you felt the need for a railway sandwich and a cup of MaxPax coffee. I'd hazard a guess that none of us ever chose to go on a train journey **just** for a MaxPax coffee, but rather that there was food to sustain us on our journey. The purpose being to arrive at our destination. So what is our destination?

The Westminster Catechism was written by the Westminster assembly, which was a gathering of leading English theologians who met regularly during the English Civil War between 1643 and 1649, and the English Parliament ratified what they said in 1647. And the first point they wrote down was this; 'What is the chief end of man? What is the chief end of humankind?' Man's chief end, our destination, is to glorify God and to enjoy him forever. To enjoy God and to glorify God and to enjoy him forever. Psalm 100 says, we're told to 'Know that the Lord is God; it's he who made us and we are his. We are his people, the sheep of his pasture.' So our destination, the end of our journey, is to worship God, to glorify God and to enjoy him forever.

So I wonder if you've ever considered what it is that draws you here on a Sunday morning. Why do we gather? What is it that inspires your coming in? Could it be that within each one of us there is a longing, something that draws us in our hearts, a search for meaning, belonging, value, purpose, everything that it means to be loved? Because the meaning of life is to glorify God and enjoy him forever because he enjoys us.

So if our life is a journey and our ultimate destination, our arrival, our coming in, is the place where we can enjoy him forever, we have to get there. And we've been blessed with the gift of our lives in which to make that journey. And as we make that journey, we need to be sustained as we journey along. Which is why the Bible tells us the story of Moses leading the people of Egypt through the wilderness from slavery

in Egypt to freedom in the promised land. The promised land is going to be a land flowing with milk and honey, where God's people can glorify God and enjoy him forever.

And as they journey through the wilderness, it's a journey that takes 40 years, a generation, a lifetime. And as they make that journey, they complain about hunger and thirst. And so they need to be sustained, not with coffee and sandwiches, but with water and manna in the desert; God's gift, food for the journey, God's sustaining presence, his gift to help his people to journey on to their destination. There's a story that illustrates our own stories, our own journey through life, our own destiny and the need for God to sustain us as we journey on.

So we come today to our first reading from 2 Kings. And the prophet Elijah was living at a time of famine. So in a pre industrial society with no refrigeration, the harvest had to last all the year round. And as you got nearer and nearer to the harvest, food became rather scarce and there was a short period of famine. And so in that period of famine, people are hungry and have nothing to sustain them for the journey.

But religious tradition demanded that the first fruits of the harvest we offer to God in praise and thanksgiving for the fruits of the harvest. So the chief end of man is to glorify God, not to stuff your face. So in praise and thanksgiving, the first fruits of the harvest are offered to God. So it must have been quite difficult, mustn't it, to give the very best of what you've got to God when you're hungry and your children are hungry. But we read a man comes at the time of famine to offer the first fruits of the harvest to God and presents them to Elijah and the prophets.

And what does God require? The prophet Micah says, what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, to love kindness and to walk humbly with your God? So God's response to the gifts of his people to the prophet Elijah is to bless. Elijah takes the food and commands that it be shared among all the hungry people. So the little that was offered through the grace and the mercy of God is blessed and sustains the people in their hunger as they journey on. God provides food for the journey of life. He is sustaining help in the good times and the difficult times, so that as we journey on, we're drawn closer to God.

Jesus did many things that echoed the prophet Elijah, evidence that Jesus stands in the line of succession of the Old Testament prophets, the great spiritual leaders of Israel's history, and reminding us that all those stories point to Jesus as Lord and Saviour, God with us. So Jesus entered into the human condition to be God with us, to share the journey of life that we all embark upon, to lead us through it, to shepherd us, and to bring us home to our destination.

So thinking again about what it is that inspires our coming in, why did that huge crowd gather around Jesus that we read about in the gospel reading? You remember that Jesus said, come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. And St John tells us that this huge crowd keeps following Jesus because they saw all the signs that he was doing for the sick. St Mark, writing about the same incident, describes the crowd as being like sheep without a shepherd. So people were lost, they were poor. Galilee was a place where you passed through. Nobody went to Galilee; it was kind of a

backwater that nobody bothered about. It wasn't a place that you went to. It wasn't ever a destination, 'Let's go to Galilee.'

But there Jesus comes to meet his people, to find us, to join us, to sustain us on our journey and to lead us home. And we note, because John never wasted any words, and John writes, 'The Passover of the Jews was near.' Well, the Passover of the Jews was the festival where the Jewish people remembered that they were spared death when they were slaves in Egypt and when they were set free to begin their journey home out of slavery. A journey that began through the baking of bread, unleavened bread, special symbolic bread, food for the journey, God's sustaining food for the journey home. So in the presence of the crowd, Jesus blesses the little gift that humanity has to offer him, and in blessing, everybody is fed, everybody's needs are met. And Jesus commands that nothing may be lost; no-one may be lost; all the sheep of his flock are going to be led home. All the sheep of his flock are going to be sustained for the journey.

So I think perhaps we come, don't we, together on a Sunday, to be sustained and refreshed. I hesitate to suggest that our church is anything like a buffet car on a train, where we might find refreshment for our journey on. But you see my point. We come to Holy Communion to receive food for the journey, a sign and a symbol of the presence of our Lord Jesus with us, present by his Spirit, the one who draws us to himself, who calls us in our inner being to gather around him, that we might be refreshed, sustained.

One of my favourite stories in the Bible is the story at the beginning of John's gospel, where Jesus is followed by some of John the Baptist's disciples. And he turns to them and says, 'What do you want?' And they say, 'Where are you staying?' And he says, 'Well, come with me and I'll show you.' And these disciples go with him back to the place where Jesus is staying and are sustained by him. It's wonderful to imagine these hungry people, hungry in their souls, being sustained by Jesus, making them a cup of tea and saying, you know, 'Have a sit down, let's have a chat.'

And that's what we do. We come and we enter together into his home. We spend time with him. We receive from him that we might be equipped and sustained for the onward journey together to our destination, the place where we can glorify God and enjoy him forever.

So we can see some of the wonder that St Paul expresses in the second reading we heard today; 'For this reason, the fact that God calls us and sustains us. For this reason, I bow my knees before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth takes its name. I pray that according to the riches of his glory, he may grant that you may be strengthened in your inner being with power through his Spirit, that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith.'

So our coming in is to receive from him, to praise him as we journey on together, to be equipped, as Graham told us last week, to go out and to witness for him on our journey that is our destiny, our destination, the place where we may glorify him and enjoy him forever. In Jesus name. Amen.