

Our God of Fantastic Moves

A sermon preached by The Revd Canon Andrew Wright on Sunday 1 August 2021 in St Peter's Wolvercote
Refs: Exodus 16. 2-4,9-15; Ephesians 4.1-16; John 6. 24-35

On my very first Saturday as a young curate, having been ordained on the previous Sunday, I was sitting in my tiny flat on the third floor of a block of flats in an infamous street in an infamous estate in Liverpool. I was very lonely. Early in the evening I thought I must get out and meet some people. Just up the road was the local hub of activity. The British Legion. I went down in my new dog collar and shirt and was ushered in. There was a huge hall absolutely packed with people, packed. All sitting at tables of six, there must have been 50 tables or more. It was very quiet....except for the bingo caller. Hushed reverence. Bingo is a serious business. I sat down on the only seat I could find. Making up the final piece in that table of six. After a few minutes someone on my table shouted "house" and won £25. Then we were off again, "two fat ladies 88", "legs 11", "Kelly's eye number 1"....and then another on my table shouted "house" and won £50. People started looking over. "Come over here father..." . Empty chairs suddenly emerged. I got up and moved to a table on the far side of the room. Then we were off on the final round. "Two little ducks 22" , "top of the shop 90", "unlucky for some 13", "never been kissed 16" . After about five or ten minutes of this someone on my new table shouted "house" and won £100. That really got things going. I was made Vice President of the Club, never had to buy another drink and all kinds of people used to come up to me in the street asking if I would touch their raffle tickets. God, I decided, must have a sense of humour. I could only sit back and laugh. I will return to laughter later.

But another true but this time tragic story to set the scene. I had a young cousin, Fiona, who died suddenly, as a result of a gas leak, when she was just 24. She lived in Paris and she had just returned from a holiday in the south of France. Extraordinarily she had written a postcard to her parents while she was on holiday, which they received after they learnt of her death. Using a quote, now well-known but then much less so, she had simply written "there are two gifts that parents can give to their children, the first is roots, the second is wings." And then she had simply added, "thanks for them both".

Giving those gifts of roots and wings is indeed the challenge of parenting. But surely these are also the gifts of God. Into his love, acceptance and purposes we are called to put down deep roots. But his call is not to a cosy nest. Rather it is to take wing into costly service and the transformative love of others.

As I reflected on today's three readings, I found myself wondering what it means to put roots down into God. Perhaps a good place to start is with that Ephesians passage 4:14. "We must no longer be children, tossed to and fro and blown about by every wind of doctrine". I am reminded of the parable of the sower, of that seed which falls on the inadequate ground, springing up but wilting and dying in the heat of the sun. The roots are too shallow. As thoughtful and reflective people, constantly trying to make sense of faith in the midst of our often confusing and challenging lives, it can be easier said than done, to sustain that deep underlying rootedness. It is a theme taken up across our readings.

In the Exodus reading we meet the people of Israel, grumbling and moaning in their wilderness wandering. We might as well have stayed in slavery in Egypt, they say, at least we had enough to eat. How quickly they seem to have forgotten the God who led them safely out of Egypt and across the sea. How quickly the songs of praise have turned to ones of complaint. Moses and Aaron rebuff their grumpiness. "In the morning you shall have your fill of bread, then you shall know that I am the Lord your God". And there in the morning indeed it was. This is an ancient story told as one of the foundation narratives of the nation, a nation which is called to put down roots into the one who is the Lord their God, and who is with them, in wilderness and in green pastures. These are the roots from which they are called to take wing.

In the Ephesians letter the call is to quality of life. To humility, gentleness and patience, to bearing with one another in love, to unity and peace. To a proper use of our God-given gifts. But the context for this call to a quality of life and love is Christ, the head, in whom we are all linked as one body and in whom all we do

should be rooted. "We must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ". His life, his work, his teaching, his death, his resurrection. These are the roots from which we are called to take wing.

And so, to the Gospel, to John's "book of life". Today's story comes in the aftermath of the feeding of the 5000, and in many ways it echoes the earlier Exodus story. It takes up the theme of God-given sustaining bread in remote places. The crowds pursue Jesus, taking to the boats as they hunt him down to the far side of the lake. They seem to be wanting to see another miracle in a "give us another one" kind of way. Jesus tells them that they have missed the real truth of what they have seen. The meaning is not in the conjuring of enough bread and fish to provide a picnic sufficient for all. Rather it is in the underlying reality that in Jesus is to be found the bread of life. "Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty". These are the roots from which we are called to take wing.

All these passages deal in that sweeping narrative of the Old and New Testaments, the narratives in which both Judaism and Christianity are rooted. God the creator in whom all things are bound together, God the redeemer who calls us to live in partnership with him, God the sustainer who walks with us, God revealed in Jesus Christ. That is the deep magic of which CS Lewis wrote - unprovable, often challenging, frequently problematic in a largely skeptical age - and yet a deep magic in which many millions over two millennia have found the springboard for their lives. If we are serious about what we profess each Sunday morning, how can we ensure that rootedness for ourselves, a rootedness which can provide the solid foundation for our lives from which we can truly take wing in sacrificial love and service.

This is where we come to the laughter. I came across a poem in Mark Oakley's wonderful book, "A Splash of Words". It is from Hafiz, the fourteenth century Persian poet, a Muslim in the Sufi tradition of which he was a master. He, writes Mark Oakley, wishes to "distil his self so that the deeper dimensions of divine and human love, might be welcomed, understood and expressed in his life" He wishes to be lost and consumed in God, as a moth is consumed by the flame to which it is drawn. But he also knows that the path to this is very, very hard. The poem is simple:

*What is the difference
Between your experience of Existence
And that of a saint?*

*The saint knows
That the spiritual path
Is a sublime chess game with God*

*And that the Beloved
Has just made such a Fantastic Move*

*That the saint is now continually
Tripping over Joy
And bursting out in Laughter
And saying, "I surrender,"*

*Whereas, my dear,
I am afraid you still think*

You have a thousand serious moves.

This really spoke to me, as it might perhaps to so many of us who might feel that we are in that category of those who are easily pushed around by the fast changing winds, questions and dilemmas of life. Hafiz compares life to a chess game, immensely complex as we try to play it, full of danger, fraught with tension, haunted by the prospect of loss. How it can push our stress levels to breaking point! But, says Hafiz, what the saints recognise is that the secret is to realise that God has always played a Fantastic Move (for which there are capital letters). We have to hold on to that even in the middle of tough times, and seemingly unanswerable questions.

In many ways this reflects our readings. The people of Israel, hungry in the desert, need to hold on to the Fantastic Move God has played in the Exodus, demonstrating that they are his people, and he is always with them.

The recipients of the letter to the Ephesians need to root their lives and actions in the Fantastic Move played by God through the life and death of Jesus.

The searchers after more miracles from Jesus, need lift their heads higher looking to the deeper message of his signs, recognising that life in all its fullness, as John put it elsewhere, is to be found in partnership and in dialogue with Jesus, in whom can be found truly sustaining bread and water. They have seen a Fantastic Move but they simply have not recognised its meaning.

Hafiz suggests that in the face of God's Fantastic Moves we can only burst out in laughter and surrender, Tripping over in Joy, as Hafiz puts it. Oakley reminds us of one chess master who wrote that "in chess one cannot control everything. Sometimes a game takes an unexpected turn, in which beauty begins to emerge. Both players are always instrumental in this."

I suppose Hafiz is suggesting that in reality we have to give up our constant battles to control the uncontrollable. We sometimes have to look up from the trees and see the wood. We need to accept that the moves we make may make no difference at all. God is God. The game may make no sense at times and yet for believers, even fragile and questioning ones, we have to believe that ultimately it will all make some sense. In doing so perhaps we can relax into God and laugh.

Elsewhere Hafiz wrote

*Pulling out the chair
Beneath your mind
And watching you fall upon God*

*What else is there
For Hafiz to do
That is any fun in this world*

Putting down roots into God involves a measure or more of the surrender to which Hafiz refers. That kind of letting go, that kind of surrender is very, very hard for us. Perhaps for some it is impossible. I certainly struggle with it. Many of Jesus' encounters and stories revolve around this. The man who builds more and more barns to store his stuff. The rich young ruler who wants to follow Jesus but cannot deprioritise his wealth. Perhaps this lack of surrender compromises our souls and stops the laughter. Our roots are prevented from reaching sufficient depth and leave us weak and wanting.

Tripping over Joy - how we long for laughter and fun. Perhaps the secret lies in that greater rootedness, greater surrender to the God. If we are even a bit serious about what we do and say here on Sunday mornings then surely we must believe, for all our questions, that God has played some Fantastic Moves. If we can really grasp that and allow God to allow us to take root in him, perhaps we will find ourselves laughing with Hafiz.

Today in this service as every Sunday we celebrate God's Fantastic Moves. Like the Israelites in the desert we feed on the bread which takes us to the very heart of those Fantastic Moves. In doing so we seek sustenance for the complex and uncertain chess games of our lives. Life is a serious business. Being a Christian is a serious business. But there are times to remind ourselves that the secret may not always be in pondering with great angst every move, not in bemoaning our circumstances. Rather the secret lies in letting go and relaxing into a God of love, a God of Fantastic Moves who ultimately holds the game in his hands. Can we let go into that? Can I? Perhaps it is the key to looking back on our lives when they are done and shouting "house"!

Amen