

SERMON PREACHED AT SJH TRINITY 10 WEEK 19 YEAR B 8 AUGUST 2021.

Iran is a dangerous place to be a Christian. I read recently an interview with a Christian leader, identified only as 'Pastor X', who has been setting up what are called 'underground churches': groups of Christians meeting secretly in people's homes. They seem to be flourishing. He was asked to comment on church life in the West, which he seems to know pretty well. I don't agree with everything he says, but it got me thinking. Here's a lengthy quotation.

"The problem with the western model is '*Come and see*'. That's not what Jesus said. Jesus said, '*Go and find*'. We don't even see a '*Come and see*' model – it's all about going and finding the lost. Going where they are.

"We don't engage people anymore and that's a big problem that we see in the West.

"Jesus hung out with sinners but the western church hangs out with itself – a club. Also it is 'faking good'. Everyone goes to church with a smile, all happy and saying, '*Praise the Lord! Hallelujah. God bless,*' even though they're hurting inside. That's not church, that's not community.

"We have a saying in the Middle East that you don't know someone until you've gone on a trip with them and that you've eaten with them and it's just so true. True discipleship isn't something you do once a week. It's what you do every day because that's when you get to know people. That's when you're with them during the good times and the bad times, when they're sick when they're healthy. That's what brings true family."

End of quotation.

A question Christians have faced in every age and every place is how to be a Christian community: how to be 'church'. The answer might be different in England from the answer in Iran. Before Christianity became an official religion there were no church buildings. Christians met in homes or in secret places like catacombs – underground cemeteries. Advance fifteen hundred years. Methodism began within the Church of England, but was forced out. People would gather outside – in forest clearings for example – to hear John Wesley preach and sing the latest hymn by his brother Charles. In our present day, alongside mainstream churches, there are groups of Christians meeting in houses, or schools, or in other buildings like the former *Boathouse* pub in Stapenhill. And of course there are people whose main contact with other Christians is online.

In today's gospel reading Jesus calls himself the bread of life. We're at the mid-point of five Sundays on which the readings come from the sixth chapter of S. John's gospel, which begins with the feeding of the five thousand. We shall actually break the sequence next Sunday when we're observing the feast of the Assumption. As often in S. John's gospel, the fourth gospel as it's also called, an action of Jesus (feeding the crowd in this case) is an opportunity for a lengthy dialogue.

Today's gospel repeats the final verse of last week's. Jesus calls himself the bread of life: an astonishing claim, which the crowd find difficult to understand and accept. We're familiar with it. It is relevant to the issues raised by Pastor X. To begin with, the term 'bread' implies community. It is a corporate image, not an individual one. A companion is literally someone with whom you share bread. Jesus' followers are brought into a community sustained by him, the bread of life. Pastor X pleaded that church members should know each other: that the church should be a place where deep concerns, joys and sorrows, could be safely shared, rather than just a club. It's no surprise that Pastor X mentioned eating together. I think he mainly had ordinary meals in mind, but the passage from John points us also to the eucharist. Jesus says, "I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats of this bread will live for ever." Today's passage ends, "The bread that I shall give for the life of the world is my flesh." In next week's passage, which we won't get to hear, Jesus talks about eating his flesh and drinking his blood. Taking part in the eucharist is an activity at the heart of the church's life.

The eucharist keeps the community focussed on the death and resurrection of Jesus. He gives his flesh for the life of the world. This is echoed at the end of today's New Testament reading, when the writer says, 'Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.' What Christ has done for us underpins the way we should relate to each other as the writer of Ephesians has just described: put away all bitterness, wrath and anger...be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you.

So the church is more than a club. It is a community of people who are sustained by the life of Christ, and whose dealings with others express what Christ has done. We may begin to practise discipleship in the church community, but if our lives are to be consistent it will also be expressed beyond any boundaries we perceive. As Pastor X says, it will be something we do every day.