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Christ Church West Wimbledon
Sermon : August 8th, 2021
“10th Sunday After Trinity ”

TRINITY 10, 2021

A few years ago, I saw a banner headline in a newspaper that caught my eye: “If you want to be cheerful, go to church”. A study of almost 10,000 people over the age of 50 had tried to discover the kind of social activities that made people less likely to be depressed. Past research had shown a link with religious observance and feeling happier, but researchers have not been able to establish the cause. This survey had apparently concluded that if you want to be happy, go to church – but went on ominously to warn: don’t join any political party, for they also found that belonging to a political party actually made people’s lives more unhappy. Make of that what you will – but apologies to those of you who are active in your political party! But the findings were clear - religious activity seemed to be the only thing to make a positive difference to a person’s mental well-being over time. However, the report concluded that the power of religion could be less because of its spiritual effects than the structure, support and sense of community that it provided. Said the report’s author: “It is not clear to us how much this is about religion, or whether it may be about the sense of belonging and not being socially isolated”. I have no idea where this is relevant in our Covid world but it gives food for thought.

Anyway, encouraging though these findings may be, I would hope that it is actually because religion can give **both** a sense of belonging and also a sense of the spiritual. After all you can get a sense of belonging from all sorts of other varied social groups and charitable organisations. But it is the sense of the spiritual that God brings through our worship and prayer that binds us together. St Paul, writing to the Church in Ephesus, describes the people as “marked with a seal for the day of redemption”. It is when we are baptised that we are “sealed with the Holy Spirit”. So, it follows that our vocation is to be the people of God, living a life of love, as Christ loved us and gave himself for us: as we experience the compassion and kindness of God as a strand in our lives, so

we should become the people who show God's compassion and kindness to others. Paul points us to tough practicalities if we are to be true to ourselves as God's beloved children, putting aside things which bring about no good and instead cultivating the gifts of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control. Through all this too, we have the promise of Jesus that "I am the bread of life. He who comes to me will never go hungry and he who believes in me will never be thirsty". Remember in this passage and the one from last Sunday, the crowds were fed but they then continue to traipse around following Jesus, many, if not most of them, seeming to regard him as some kind of free meal ticket for the rest of their lives, completely misunderstanding when he speaks of himself as the 'bread of life'. They assume that they will never go physically hungry ever again, whereas Jesus was of course speaking of their spiritual hunger being satisfied.

What can we draw from these passages as John outlines them? Yes, the people were clinging to his every word, but for the wrong reasons. They were there for what they could get out of it – in this case being fed with bread. But, as one commentator has put it "Jesus is not a restaurant where we indulge ourselves and eventually roll home to bed; he is the Bread of Life, and supplies us with the food we need in order to live out his risen life among the people we are led to". In a similar way, St Paul gives us a picture of such a life worked out carefully in practical terms, fed spiritually into a united body, displaying God's loving and humility.

So just as we feel after we have eaten a good meal – contented and satisfied and full – that's how we can feel when we spend time in the company of Jesus of Nazareth. Even when we feel we are getting older, we can still be spiritually alive and bounding with life and energy, ready to spend eternity alive in God's company.

That promise alone should make us all happy and cheerful and give us strength to go on to tomorrow, as our prayer for today puts it: "As Jesus taught his disciples to be persistent in prayer, give us patience and courage never to lose hope but always to bring our prayers before you".

One final thing. Many of us have been following the Olympics and marvelling at the skill and discipline of the young sportsmen and women. One interview made a deep impression on me. A young Welsh swimmer, Daniel Jervis, said in a post-race interview after finishing 5th in the 1500m freestyle: *"I'm proud to be a Welshman swimming for Britain and I hope I will break the record sometime in the future. But for now, I want to thank my village in Wales and above all to thank my church, Sardis Baptist Church, who've been really supportive of me. Everyone back home has been praying for me. I'm proud of a lot of things I have done in my life but what I am most proud of in*

my life is that I am a Christian and God was with me tonight and I'm just really grateful to be representing him". Simple. Bold. Humble.

May we all be encouraged as we echo and live out those words of that young man: 'I am a Christian and God is always with me and I'm really grateful to be representing him'. Amen.