Trinity 11 (Proper 16 - Second Service)
St Thomas, Salisbury, 2020

2 Kings 6:8-23
John 6: 56-69

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

When I trained for ordination at Wescott House in Cambridge some 18 or so years ago, there was a lecturer in the Divinity faculty who used to boast that each year he would average destroying the faith of at least one ordinand who attended his lectures. I have no idea whether there was any truth in this boast, but certainly he was a highly robust and very highly qualified scholar who used to push his audience as hard as possible towards the edge of their intellectual competence. He had a particular fascination with ordinands, who of course turned up in his lectures with faith in God, and the Christian framework for that faith. He used to delight in seeing whether he could bend or even break the faith of people who he considered weren’t intellectually robust enough.

Doubtless he took a degree of enjoyment from this exercise. I felt, and still feel, that it was pretty cynical way of going about things, and certainly a number of us found it a fairly alarming experience.

There has ever been a tension in Christianity between how much we experience our faith as an intellectual exercise, and how much it is something at a level of the gut, or the heart. What is the place of emotion in belief? What is the place of rational analysis? Next month I have been invited to contribute to the symposium in the Diocese of Gloucester about the Church of England’s reaction to lockdown, and particularly doing a bit of a post-mortem on the House of Bishops guidelines on things like celebrating communion, praying in church, and online worship. And just beginning to think through how it felt at the time, back at the end of March, and how things unfolded over the succeeding months, I am struck by how complicated my responses, my personal reactions were to the curtailing of worship. And some of it was rational, intellectual if you like. I took issue with some of the decisions on a doctrinal, ecclesiological or theological basis, and I supported other decisions on the same basis. But quite a lot of my response I think was also emotional, a response on the level of the heart, a response to the separation from the altar, church, and from you my brothers and sisters.

Today’s gospel reading is part of the much larger section of St John known as the “bread of life discourse”. We read all of it once every three years: it will crop up next summer for example. But we get a snippet of it today, and it’s helpful for us as we think about this complex mixture of mind and heart, of emotion and rational response that makes up, probably, most of our faith.

Jesus is talking about his death, his sacrifice, and how it is that his followers, those who will become known as Christians, participate in that death. And he uses language of flesh, of body, and it sounds a bit cannibalistic, and a bit weird, and we hear that this is too far for some of his followers, and they pack up and leave. “This teaching is difficult: who can accept it?”

I think the key is in the last couple of lines. Jesus says to the 12 Apostles, to the closest of his companions, is this getting too much for you? Do you want to draw stumps at this point? And Simon Peter says to him, “Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life.”
I think we are mistaken if we focus too much on the defining characteristic of Christian faith either being intellectual rigour, or an emotional response. The defining characteristic of Christian faith is Christ. It is, in fact, a relationship with a person.

That is not say that we shouldn’t think hard about our faith: we ought to. Doctrine and tradition and biblical analysis and all the rest of it are there to help us to understand and be confident about where we have come from and how our faith is distinctive. We ought to study and question and explore. And similarly a faith devoid entirely of emotional engagement would be pretty peculiar as well. After all we are here because we believe that we are loved, and responding to love without emotion would be peculiar. But we know that our capacity for rational thought is limited, and we also all know, don’t we, that we cannot always trust our emotions. When we are ecstatic about something, or when we are deeply depressed, we know very well that our analysis of the reality of any situation can be compromised.

But Christian faith is above all other things a friendship. Is a response to a person, to a man. “Lord, to whom else can we go? You have the words of eternal life”. And it is in relationship that we find not only the space to grow, but the generosity, forgiveness and challenge to do that healthily, together and individually. Our engagement, primarily, is not with a book of law, or with our own “inner truth”, whatever that might mean on any given day.

When we come here, we come to the table of our Lord, our friend. To the man who, in the words of hymn writer John Newton, is Jesus “my Saviour, Shepherd, friend, my prophet, priest and king, my Lord, my life, my way, my end.”

It is that person, that Jesus, who wants to take this journey of faith, of exploration and doubt, of enquiry, and love with us, who in just a few moments is going to give himself to us in the blessed Sacrament, his body, by which we abide in him, and in which the relationship deepens, and we learn to love because he first loved us.

Amen.