

PENTECOST 13B 22-08-2021 *The Reverend Lorna Green*

1 Kings 8:22-30, 41-43; Psalm 84; Ephesians 6:10-20; John 6:56-69

(Jesus said) 'Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them. Just as the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father, so whoever eats me will live because of me. This is the bread that came down from heaven, not like that which your ancestors ate, and they died. But the one who eats this bread will live for ever.' He said these things while he was teaching in the synagogue at Capernaum. When many of his disciples heard it, they said, 'This teaching is difficult; who can accept it?' But Jesus, being aware that his disciples were complaining about it, said to them, 'Does this offend you? Then what if you were to see the Son of Man ascending to where he was before? It is the spirit that gives life; the flesh is useless. The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life. But among you there are some who do not believe.' For Jesus knew from the first who were the ones that did not believe, and who was the one that would betray him. And he said, 'For this reason I have told you that no one can come to me unless it is granted by the Father.' Because of this many of his disciples turned back and no longer went about with him. So Jesus asked the twelve, 'Do you also wish to go away?' Simon Peter answered him, 'Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and know that you are the Holy One of God.'

This has been yet another week of horror around the world. Afghanistan, Haiti, record high temperatures and wild-fires in the northern hemisphere- and the global pandemic, continuing to affect people everywhere as it causes illness and death, social and economic chaos.

When I was a child listening to my parents remember the second world war, I used to wonder whether people thought the end of the world was coming.

Since then, just in my lifetime, there have been wars and conflicts in Korea, Kenya, Vietnam, Northern Ireland, the Falklands, the Gulf War, Palestine, Kosovo, Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, Syria, Yemen, and many African countries. I've probably left some out, but you get the picture.

There is always a war somewhere, and always people suffering and wondering if this is the end of their world.

The writer of the letter to the Ephesians wrote of rulers and authorities, powers, and spiritual forces of evil. For his readers and listeners, that meant those persecuting and discriminating against Christians, forcing them to worship the Emperor.

The writer urges Christians to put on the armour of God, and if you read carefully you will notice that this armour is all for defence; the only weapon is the sword of the Spirit, the word of God. You will also notice there is no armour for your back, you must meet threats head on.

What does this armour consist of? Truth, righteousness, proclaiming the gospel of peace, faith, and salvation.

The early Christians were pacifists who refused to take up arms and fight. The letter to the Ephesians is about what the writer calls spiritual warfare and protecting oneself against whatever would draw you away from following Jesus- the Prince of Peace. These metaphors of spiritual warfare cannot be used to justify physical war- war against human beings who some may have decided are 'enemies of God'.

Christians are called to be peacemakers, which wasn't easy back then when they were all living under the military dictatorship of Rome. Christians did not fight or resist arrest, following the example of Jesus, until Christianity was legalised in the year 325.

After this time, Christianity has a shameful history of violence and war, choosing to believe they were justified in killing 'enemies of God': heretics, Jews, Muslims, those who did not agree with or believe in what they were told to believe.

According to historian Kathleen McVey, the church's three basic positions about war- pacifism, just war, and holy war- are all based on the biblical interpretation of spiritual warfare against the powers of 'this present darkness'. She wrote: "Historical study undermines the illusion, perhaps still widespread among Christians, that theirs is a history of peace while others, such as Muslims, have 'lived by the sword'." Where can we see spiritual darkness operating against God's power of love in today's world? Is it in our own minds, or do we believe it is in the minds of those we see as 'others'? Can we bring peace into this troubled, dark world?

When Jesus was trying to explain to his followers that he is the bread of life, some found his teaching too hard to accept and wandered away. He asked the Twelve what they thought, and Simon Peter said. "Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life."

Being a follower of Jesus isn't easy, and Jesus never said it would be. Why did his disciples follow him and keep on following him, when it could mean being poor and homeless, being persecuted and possibly even killed? They followed him because he had the words of eternal life. He was the truth, the One who brought God into our midst. Even when life was horribly hard, following Jesus was the only way.

Does that hold true for us?

We live in a beautiful country where we are relatively wealthy and can live healthy, happy lives, on the whole. Most of the world's people could not say the same.

And yet we too live with suffering; and we see the suffering of the world around us and feel helpless, impotent, despairing.

We are overloaded with news of the world's suffering; so how can we cope? What can we do as followers of Jesus?

How can we protect our mental health from crumbling under the weight of anxiety and sorrow, faced with so much tragedy?

This week I read a wonderful article by Nadia Bolz-Weber, a Lutheran pastor and writer in the United States. She wrote about this sense of overload and the guilt we can feel because we can't attend to every single crisis.

She writes of asking herself three questions:

1. What's mine to do, and what's NOT mine to do?
2. What's mine to say, and what's not mine to say?
3. What's mine to care about, and what's not mine to care about?

Nadia points out that no single person can do everything. All the issues that concern us are worthy, and SOMEONE needs to care about them; but maybe I need to focus on something else.

This is what she says:

'I'm not saying we should put our heads in the sand, I'm saying that if your circuits are overwhelmed there's a reason and the reason isn't because you are heartless, it's because there is not a human heart on this planet that can bear all of what it happening right now.'

Where do we turn when it seems we are surrounded by tragedy? Who do we turn to? We know who has the words of eternal life; so we can turn to him, to Jesus. We can pray. We can tell him- this is all too much. Show me where to focus my efforts and my energy, because you know me better than I know myself.

When King Solomon prayed for the newly built Temple he asked God to hear the prayers of all who would pray there, and all who would turn towards God- who cannot be contained by any Temple. The Psalmist asks the Lord God of hosts to hear his prayer.

And so we ask God to hear our prayers for the world as creation suffers, as we ask forgiveness, and as we seek to follow the way of our Lord Jesus- the way of peace.

The Lord be with you.

