

For the last few months I have been needing to refill one of the tyres on the car more regularly than others. There was no obvious puncture, or even leak, it just needed to be filled more. Over 6 weeks ago a friend told me of a really good local garage they thought would be able to locate and sort the problem easily.

I have procrastinated about it. There has been so much going on, and just turning up at a garage I didn't know seemed more overwhelming than it should have. On Monday morning I woke and decided I had procrastinated long enough. It took less than 30 minutes to fix. I had procrastinated for nothing. It could have been fixed weeks ago.

I suspect I am not the only one who at different times in their life put off things which are actually relatively simple because for whatever reason we feel like it is one thing too far, or more challenging than we think it needs today – even when we have probably done much more scary things even today!

Today we hear a reading from the first book of Kings in which Elijah appears to have that feeling. Elijah has achieved so much in the lead up to the passage we hear from chapter 19 today. Elijah finds himself in the wilderness in this reading – both literally and figuratively, as he asks God to take his life. He has been through a traumatic episode with the prophets of Baal and others; and although he successfully dispatched the prophets and demonstrated God's power to Ahab, something is wrong. Elijah seems to feel despondent, or like he has failed – he seems overwhelmed¹. We might describe Elijah as burnt-out – he is exhausted after all that he has been through, and cannot see how to move forward. In many ways, Elijah is his own worst enemy. We are reminded in this story, that God is always with us, holding us, sustaining us, even when we feel at our most vulnerable.

Elijah was not the first, nor is he the last who struggles at times with vulnerability. Nor is he alone at times of despair of needing to be aware that God is with him, especially at this time when all else seems too much. Sometimes we need to be reminded and even reassured again and again of who God is, and that we are never alone, no matter what might overwhelm us or even inspire us.

Our gospel readings in the last month seem to have gone round and round in circles, and in fact some of the stories we have had more than once. We have had both Mark and John's version of the feeding of the 5000 and, during these weeks in August, we only hear from John 6 where Jesus unpacks what this story means, which at times is frustrating. The writer of John in particular uses this method narrative, to move the audience deeper and deeper into the idea and image that Jesus is presenting. Of course in John this also brings Jesus closer to execution, because with each deepening explanation he offends the establishment more and more, and rocks the image that there is only one kind of leadership or one kind of ruler. This of course is

¹ <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/ordinary-19-2/commentary-on-1-kings-194-8-3>

a stark contrast to God – John wants us to understand who Jesus is, and where Jesus authority comes from. The pattern which John is creating here are not comfortable – and today as Jesus explains what being the bread of life means – the discomfort metre goes off the scale.

Throughout John 6, the writing is reinforcing the true origins of Jesus. The reworking of the story of God's provision in the wilderness is not only to illustrate that like God Jesus provides, but to affirm that like God, what Jesus provides is also who Jesus is and that like God, Jesus' provision originates from the same place.

This very complicated set of verses is confirming for those who are listening to Jesus that he has seen the Father because he comes from the Father and he is *God made flesh*. The reason for the incarnation is for us now to see God, to experience God in the fullness of relationship that was assumed in God's relationship with God's people but could only be known to a certain level previously. For many in the crowd – this is not what they wanted to hear. It challenged who they were. But like the story of Elijah, this message has at its heart the truth that God wants a relationship; wants to hold and support us; is with us whatever the circumstance. This is the message of the bread of life – that we might imitate Christ; help each other, but most certainly be upheld by God loves.

The manna stories both in Exodus, and in John are about trusting in God². Trusting in what we know from our history and what we have learnt from that; as well as trusting for the future as well. But this is not just blind trust. It is challenging trust. In the words Jesus says he confronts the leaders who are using their heritage, their status, to block access to God by others. They are using history to limit others – limit understanding of who God is. While the past might not be able to be changed – at least we should learn from it and not relive or recreate its mistakes. And at times we will have to correct the mistakes it has created moving forward.

At the end of the passage today from John 6, Jesus asks a question about origins – Jesus comes from God – but who were your ancestors? Jesus is not discounting ancestry, he confirms it is important; but there is something more important Jesus says – what you do with it? Now of course, this will mean different things to those who are listening – to the religious leaders who are direct descendants of David – this is an attack on their certainty – their ancestry gives them authority and insight which they do not want to have challenged. For the crowd however, these words provide new possibilities for their relationship with God and each other – suddenly they have access to God, and freedoms which they didn't believe were possible. You can see why the religious and political leaders thought Jesus was an insurgent!

For God the past matters, what we learn from it, how it informs who we are, how we appease for it, how we grow from it?

² <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/ordinary-19-2/commentary-on-john-635-41-51-3>

The whole point of *bread from heaven*, the focus of these verses in chapter 6 of John, is to make clear that Jesus as the Bread of Life is a claim not only on our present and our future but also on our past. “

Which brings us back to Elijah who fell into despair because of the pain and trauma of his past and present. To despair used to be described as losing sight of God – a great sin – and yet the message of Jesus the bread of life, is that God is with us in the despair, helping us to reshape and recreate – helping us to embrace the past and the present.

The gift which Jesus brings in these circles of stories about bread and life, is that past, present and future are interrelated. By considering our past and present, we might see it for what it is, to tell its truth, and to lean into the possibility that it can see a new truth about our own origins in light of our present and promised future. That is the gift of our trust in God – that we are sustained to change the world.

Amen.