

Sermon for Sunday August 22nd 2021 (Trinity 12)

By Pat Hemsley, Licensed Lay Reader

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, my rock and my Redeemer.

John 6 verse 68; “Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life.”

After the excitement of an unexpectedly successful Olympic Games earlier this month, Monday sees the start in Tokyo of its sister event, the Paralympic Games. Once again, we’ll be treated to thrilling competitions and amazing feats of skill. Even more moving will be the stories the competitors have to tell, of triumph over adversity and low expectation, of determination and courage in the face of physical limitations and of how the human spirit can soar even when life seems to offer nothing but defeat. Behind all of this, behind the competitors, trainers and supporters lies the story of another man....Dr. Ludwig Guttmann.

When Dr. Guttmann arrived at Stoke Mandeville Hospital’s spinal unit in 1944, its patients, mainly paralysed servicemen, were largely written off. They arrived in containers looking like open coffins. They were heavily sedated and their life expectancy on the ward was approximately six months. Dr Guttmann came with a new message – a message of hope, one meant to give a sense of self-esteem and purpose to people deemed useless, and new life to men who wanted only to die.

Dr. Guttmann was met by obstruction and scepticism. Perhaps his hospital colleagues said, “This teaching is difficult; who can accept it?” The idea that disabled people, cripples as they were then called, should play a part in society was offensive to some of them and they found this new way of working very difficult to accept. Among the sceptics were some of Dr. Guttmann’s own patients. However, as they journeyed from desperation to determination, the paralysed patients at Stoke Mandeville, discovered that there was no way forward for them, except through the ministrations of Dr. Guttmann. In a year, he had turned what was essentially a death sentence into an 80% survival rate. More than that, his radical notion that playing sport would lift his wheelchair-bound patients from depression gave birth to the Paralympic games—initially at the hospital in 1948, then in earnest in 1952 and now, wonderfully and despite the odds, in Tokyo this month. Through Dr. Guttmann’s tenacity, Stoke Mandeville has become an internationally renowned centre for spinal injury rehabilitation, a place to go when normal life seems no longer possible. “To whom shall we go? You have the skills for living.”

It may seem strange, but there are parallels between that story and our gospel reading today, but whereas the one deals with earthly living, the second speaks of eternal life.

The words from St. John's gospel come at the end of Jesus' teaching about the bread of heaven. The whole of chapter six has, as its main message, Jesus' teaching about eternal life, offered through his body and blood as food for the world. "I am the bread of life." Like most of John's gospel, it's a very layered read, theologically profound and this is an especially difficult passage; we can take comfort that his followers certainly found it so; "This teaching is difficult; who can accept it?" It wasn't just that Jesus was talking at too abstract level. It wasn't just that the idea of eating flesh and drinking blood proved abhorrent for religious Jews. It was rather that what he said turned their view of the world completely on its head. This was a Messiah figure such as they had not expected. This was Jesus in whose spirit and in whose body the Word had taken permanent residence; a Jesus who offered an unthinkable relationship with himself and his Father God. No wonder many reeled away --when the way you've been brought up to think is suddenly demolished and the steady ground you thought you knew becomes an unknown, uncertain path, it's natural to turn back, preferring not to think about it anymore.

Certainly enough of Jesus' followers were offended by these new teachings for a major division to have occurred, with perhaps only the 12 disciples and a few others remaining. Saddened by the loss, Jesus warned of difficulties ahead, knowing that the hardest was yet to come. He gave them the opportunity to back out, asking, "Do you also wish to go away?". Yet Peter suddenly understood that there was no other way forward. "Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life." Here is an affirmation that Jesus offers a different dimension of life, a "heavenly" life. Jesus is not only describing it but his words bring it into being. Peter and his fellows had faith enough to accept the challenge before them, and it's because of them that we meet here today.

Being a Christian can be very challenging. The reading from the letter to the Ephesians speaks of the dangers to be faced and the battles to be fought both physically and spiritually. As we grow in faith, it's possible that we'll meet new situations, new ideas and new people all possessing the ability to shatter those conceptions we hold dear. Events in our lives may call us to question and to waver --- to suffer times of spiritual aridity and doubt. We have a choice; either to turn away, saying, "No, this is too difficult and I can't accept it," or we meet it head on, openly, trusting that through all these things the words of eternal life are being spoken and we are being given an opportunity to meet again and more fully with our Lord.

It's a blessing for countless paraplegics that Dr Guttman was not easily deterred, refusing to be beaten by all the difficulties he, and his patients faced. Instead, he demonstrated that sport could provide the words, the pointers to a new way forward and thus was born the paralympic legacy of determination to live the fullest of lives. One of the brightest hopes for a GB medal in this game's swimming events, starting on Tuesday, is a seventeen-year old girl called Ellie Challis. At the age of 16 months, she contracted meningitis and was given only a 5 per cent chance of survival. Her parents were called in to say goodbye. She did survive but lost both legs and both arms. As a

quadriplegic, as the parents of a quadriplegic, there must have been a temptation to say, "This is too difficult and we can't accept it". They chose instead the path that has led not just to life, but to a fulfilled life full of joy and purpose and a meaningful future.

It's a blessing for us that Peter and his friends refused to be deterred and were not finally beaten by the fulfilment of Jesus' worst warnings. Because, you see, eternal life is not just something which will greet us at our earthly dying; it is something which begins now, if we believe, now in this present life. It can give us hope and a purpose, turn despair into joy and determination, and restore self-esteem to those judged worthless. And it can inspire further generations who have yet to know Jesus.

"Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life."

Amen.