

In the flesh

Sermon for the 10th Sunday after Trinity – 4th August 2024

Readings [Exodus 16.2–4, 9–15](#) ; [John 6.24–35](#)

I am an Olympics romantic, and Paris 2024 is bringing back memories of London 2012, which cost a stadium-load of money but was – for my money – still the best Summer ever.

I especially remember the rush for tickets. 2012 was called the first multi-platform games, with more ways than ever to connect with events, yet still hordes of people wanted to be there, as they do in Paris: they want an unmediated experience, to see for themselves, to hear direct, to be there ‘in the flesh’ and have that flesh tingle, to feel what a commentator called ‘the fire in the noise’.

We are embodied beings. It is through our bodies, our physical senses, that we experience life. Flesh is our means of connection with the world. And it’s also the way the world can get at us, whether through the killing and maiming of warfare, or the horror of the stabbings in Southport and the violent attempts to exploit them.

Sometimes our flesh suffers without anyone trying to harm us, because sometimes your body just gets in the way. In the Exodus reading, the Israelites have escaped from Egypt. No-one is threatening them now, they are free; but they are also hungry, and you can’t eat freedom, so just now they’d swap liberty of heart and soul for a square meal in captivity.

Less seriously, I remember a time my body got in my way. During the London Olympics I got a last-minute ticket for handball, a sport to which I had been devoted ever since I’d heard the ticket was available. I set off at a trot to the station to get an early train so I’d have time for a tour of the Olympic Park; I had it all planned.

As I was about to cross the road, a bus approached. No problem – I just put on a spurt – and then something in the back of my leg popped. I juddered to a halt. Early train missed, I sat on a later one, holding a bag of Sainsbury’s ice to my calf, and hobbled into the park, my plan for high-speed sightseeing crocked, suddenly realising what a wonderful thing it was to be able to walk properly, as everyone around me seemed able to do.

I stopped two volunteers (Gamesmakers, they were called) who had first-aid armbands, and confessed that I had injured myself while trying to become a spectator. ‘Right,’ said Fiona and Angela, and led me off to the medical centre, where it seemed I was the high point of a slow day. I was put on a couch and received elite treatment. ‘You haven’t ruptured it,’ said Angela, a physiotherapist. Was she professionally disappointed? If she was, she didn’t let on, and applied an Olympic bandage.

Sometimes your body can feel like an opponent. It might be hunger, like with the Israelites; or an injury, as with me. It might be illness, disability, or pain. It

might be appetites (for food, sex, alcohol) that are hard to control. It can feel as though your flesh and blood are stopping you from being who you really want to be. Think of British 800 metres medal hope Jake Wightman, suddenly out of the Olympics because of a hamstring injury; sometimes it's just not true that you can do anything if you want it badly enough.

You can see why the philosopher Plato called the body the tomb of the soul, and you might expect something like that from the Gospel according to John, often called the 'spiritual' gospel. John begins by describing Jesus as the 'word of God' ^{John 1.1-2}, which sounds like real head stuff, religion for the mind. But then he says, 'the word became flesh' ^{John 1.14}, and his book will locate Jesus firmly in our world of flesh and blood.

John gives us seven miracle stories that he calls 'signs', pointers to what Jesus cares about, and they are stories of food and drink and sickness and health. He also gives seven images to show who Jesus is, several of them pretty earthy too. Last Sunday we had the *sign* of Jesus feeding hungry crowds with a few loaves of bread, and today we have the *image* which Jesus draws out of the sign when he says, 'I am the bread of life.'

Two things flow from this.

First, what we see in Jesus, what he shows us about God, matters fundamentally; it belongs at that deep level where you feel hunger, appetite, need, desire. Jesus could say, 'I am the spice of life' – spice is great to have, but you can manage without it – but he doesn't; he goes for the essential, he calls himself bread. That's a thing to think about when you're tempted to give church a miss, or when finding time to pray seems less important than other stuff, as it sometimes does.

Secondly, if this world of the flesh, of the senses – hearing, touching, seeing, smelling, tasting – if this bodily world can give us lively images of God, then flesh is not bad, it's not an embarrassment, it is an arena for meeting God.

Here, we try to engage all these senses in our worship. At the heart of this service is taste, when we receive the living bread – the subject of the choir's anthem just now ([Ego sum panis vivus](#), 'I am the living bread') together with the wine in the meal Jesus gave us, but there's also sight and sound; and even (if you get close to the flowers) smell.

Our worship is an end in itself, something beautiful for God, but it's also for us: it's practice for the whole of life, kindling our senses in here to enjoy better what is out there. The sight of a beautiful tree, or a kind face, the smell of baking, the taste of a strawberry that's perfectly ripe, a gorgeous harmony, these are not in themselves experiences of God (that would be idolatry), but they can be windows into God, rather as one of our stained glass windows gives shape and colour to the light from beyond that comes through it.

And a life that has no space to notice, to savour, to be grateful for such things, is a life that will find it harder to know God, because God is (as the German

mystic Hildegard of Bingen put it) *vita vitae omnis creaturae*, the life of the life of every thing created.

In Paris we are witnessing what human flesh is capable of, as the athletes (in one commentator's great phrase) 'send back reports from the very borders of human potential'. They also show us how vulnerable it is, how easily injured. But of course, each of us is more than just flesh and blood – it's important to say that, when health or age really limit you – but if we refuse to embrace ourselves as embodied creatures then we remain less than we might be.

My particular bundle of flesh has its limitations – it can't run for a train quite like it used to – but it's my home, it's what I live in; it's me. And since God has shared it with me in the bodily life of Jesus I must make it my friend, and make my own the words of Job, spoken out of his own body of affliction, 'in my flesh I shall see God' ^{Job 19:26}.

To repeat, though, flesh and blood are not all there is to me, or to you. We are more than that. And here, in this flesh and blood gathering, God wants to feed that 'more', with what Jesus calls 'the food that endures for eternal life'.

Notes

This sermon owes much to Rowan Willams' sermon 'Hearts of flesh' in *Open to Judgement*, DLT, 2002, pages 42-44.

The life of the life Hildegard of Bingen, Hymn to the Holy Spirit. H S

Reports from the borders Matthew D'Ancona writing about Rio 2016