

Food for the journey

Gillian Cooper *reflects on* Exodus 16:2-4, 9-15

Imagine it. You and your family have fled from an oppressive regime. With many others you have followed a charismatic leader across borders. You have dramatically escaped murderous pursuers. Now you are safe.

But you are in a wilderness. There are a lot of you, and there is no obvious food. Going back means slavery at best, death at worst. Going on means thirst and starvation. You turn on your leaders. What were they thinking, bringing you out here? What is the point of freedom if you are going to starve?

It could be the story of twenty-first-century refugees. But it is also the story of the Israelites. And God has things covered. It is not for the sake of their own freedom

that they have been rescued from Egypt; it is because they are destined for a role as God's people, God's representatives in the world. They have a lot to learn, and one of the first things is trust. It will take forty years to learn, and this is the first lesson. In the evening God sends meat in the form of birds. And after the morning dew there is something else, something they have never seen before, something they call "whatsit", "manna".

In our developed world we mostly take our food for granted. But on Sundays we gather to remember our dependence on God, and to eat our manna, the bread of heaven that binds us together in Christ as God's saved people. 🍞

Give us today, Lord, our daily bread, that we may be sustained on our journey. Keep us always mindful of our dependence on you, and feed us with the bread of life, that we may look forward with joy to our final feast at your table. Amen.

The Sheldon community in a time of pandemic

Part I – "guinea pigs needed"

by Julian Smith

"Guinea pigs needed", said the email – and who could resist? The Sheldon Centre was looking for volunteers to test its procedures and help assess its readiness to re-open for retreats after the first wave of the coronavirus pandemic.

The centre exists to support the work of people in ministry and is the home of the Community of Mary and Martha. The online aspects of the centre's work continued throughout lockdown last year, but the residential side

of Sheldon's life had, of course, to close.

The "guinea pigs" normally help with hospitality during retreats, so being a guest was a strange experience. For many of us this was the closest contact we'd had with anyone other than our husbands or wives since 24 March and a dozen people felt like a multitude.

The usual rule – "no clergy shop talk" – was supplemented by directions on social distancing, one-way routes and new procedures, and constant watchfulness proved exhausting.

To learn more about the centre's work, go to www.sheldon.uk.com 🍷



The books of the Old Testament

"In the beginning" – the book of Genesis

by Gillian Cooper

Genesis is the first chapter in a grand story that takes us from a garden of delight to a glorious city. It sets the stage, as God makes the world and its creatures, despairs of human beings, but allows them to play a role in the plan of salvation.

There is drama, when it seems Abraham will never have the descendants God has promised. There is humour,

when his grandson Jacob wakes up after his wedding to find he has married the wrong sister (chapter 29). There is horror, when Isaac lies on a sacrificial pyre, his father's knife descending on him (22). There is pathos, when Joseph and his brothers are reunited (45). There is mystery, when God and Jacob wrestle in the night (32).

Ancient tradition suggests that the first five books of the Bible, the Torah to Jews, the Pentateuch to scholars, were written by Moses. Yet many inconsistencies are evidence of more than one author. Scholars have long believed that these books grew up over centuries, with stories from different sources collected to make a rich tapestry. The final editor is probably responsible for prefacing the whole with Genesis 1, a statement of the supremacy of God, who brings order out of chaos. 🍷

“Do not be afraid... I am your shield.”

Genesis 15:1