

## 5<sup>th</sup> March 2023, 2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday of Lent, 'Let your light shine' – John 6:35-51 'Bread'

In 2008 my family and I moved to Bristol in order that I could start ordination training. This meant leaving a fairly well paid job in London and returning (at the age of 36) for two years to live on a student grant. The college generously gave us a house to rent at below market rates, and as a family we didn't own a car anyway, so our basic lifestyle was fairly simple.

Even so, we had to take a long hard look at our weekly supermarket shop. Out went the premium brands, in came the 'Basics' ranges. However, before we went all hair shirt, Alise and I decided on the few items we weren't prepared to compromise on – and in the end it came down to four items: we might eat everything else in the basics range, but we would always buy Heinz Tomato ketchup, proper butter, good red wine and nice bread.

I love bread. I make no secret of it – I absolutely love it. And not just certain bread, I pretty much love all of it: bloomers, granary, tiger bread, sliced or unsliced, split tins and seeded batches, baguettes and bagels, ciabattas and focaccias, naans and chapatis, pittas and puris, even Mothers Pride cardboard bread with a bit of strawberry jam or marmite. **When Jesus says 'I am the bread of life,' before I even think about what that means spiritually or theologically, I instinctively relate to this phrase on a purely visceral, emotional level, because I love bread.** Bread *is* life to me, in all its wonderful and marvellous forms.

Today is the second Sunday of Lent in our series 'Let your light shine'. Last week we looked at how Jesus transforms us. This week we look at how Jesus feeds us – and this subject is so rich, and so symbolic with multiple famous biblical stories, layered one on top of each other like a divine sliced loaf, that I'm going to have to work hard to stick to my time. But you know me – I will. I hope.

So, the passage for today comes hot on the heels of Jesus feeding the 5,000. This iconic miracle – the only one recorded in all four gospels, so it must be important – **immediately marks Jesus out as Messiah material:** in fact, Jesus has to take some time out up a mountainside, as the crowd wanted to make him king by force there and then, as John says in v15 of ch6.

If you're wondering why Jesus performs this miracle of feeding, John's gospel gives us more context than Matthew, Mark and Luke, because the discussion afterwards revolves around the previously-most-famous feeding miracle in the bible, when God fed the Israelites with manna from heaven in the desert. This is why they get so excited – having already seen other miracles, this one is the sign that makes it most clear that Jesus is the promised one, the anointed rescuer, because it connects so directly from their rescue from Egypt, which defined them as a nation, and really gave them their identity as God's people. *God had come to them again,* in the human form of Jesus, to feed them miraculously.

**And Jesus both recognises this, and challenges it, too. Yes, he says, I *am* the real deal, I am the promised one from heaven – BUT this bread is very different, for two reasons.**

**First, it is not just physical bread, but spiritual:** 'I am the bread of life,' Jesus says, 'whoever comes to me will never go hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.' (v35) This bread doesn't just feed your tummy, it heals your soul. It is what puts you right with the Almighty Lord of all creation, and is given, as Jesus concludes in our text 'for the life of the world.' (v51)

And let's notice here what Jesus says about the interaction between our choice and God's choice. The question of divine providence and human free will has exercised big brains throughout history. And lots of us get hung up on it – over the years I've had so many conversations on this question. How much is *God* and how much is *us*? Are we just puppets in a big play where the scenes are already written? Or are we working on a blank canvas and making it up as we go along?

There is a mystery to all of this – but I just want to point us to what Jesus says here, because it's fascinating. Jesus himself simply refers to both and makes no attempt to explain one in the light of the other. Quite the reverse – he endorses both God's intervention and our choice: v37 'All that the Father gives me will come to me...' divine providence '...and whoever comes to me I will never drive away' ...free will. So it turns out, dare I say it, that neither Calvin nor Arminius was quite right – or rather both emphasised one end of the spectrum too much at the expense of the other. Jesus himself tells us that our journey to faith is both God's choice AND our choice. God is at work – but we also have to co-operate with his will. There you go – 2,000 years of angst and a million pages of theology sorted out in 2 minutes 😊

**Second, this bread is permanent and not temporary.** Yes, the manna miracle was amazing, Jesus agrees: *but* v49 'your ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness, and yet they died.' It didn't solve their problem for more than a day at a time, and even a lifetime of manna only kept them alive for a normal human life. However, v50 'here is the bread that comes down from heaven, which anyone may eat and not die.' And if we didn't get the message the first time, Jesus repeats it in the very next sentence, v51: 'I am the living bread, which came down from heaven. Whoever eats this bread will live forever.'

Physical bread satisfies our basic needs but not our soul. Even for me, as a massive bread lover, it might make me feel happy for a while, and I might look forward to my next bread fix, but it doesn't make me live forever. In fact, I'm about to be tested for a gluten intolerance, so it might not even be making me live longer at all. That would be a hard thing to give up, I must confess...

It is the spiritual bread of Jesus which alone can bring us life. And this idea of bread has a remarkably rich understanding in our faith. In our staple prayer Jesus uses the idea of 'daily bread' to represent everything that we need for the day. That's a bit like manna – God's provision daily in our lives. But of course, Jesus goes further, and we also share bread and wine regularly as a way of remembering Jesus' eternal, spiritual blessing to us – the physical taking of bread feeds our spiritual lives and points us towards the true Bread of Life, Jesus the eternal Son of God, the one who calls us into his abundant life.

**Today, let's give thanks that Jesus calls us to feed on him.** How? By his word, which we can eat every day (and that's why we need to read daily – just like we eat daily). By prayer, which connects us spiritually to the bread of life, and invites us to ask for daily bread. And by symbol – by sharing bread and wine. In a moment we'll do just that, coming to the front to receive physically what points us deeper, to the bread of life.

So, may God grant us grace to keep feeding on Jesus this Lent, and thus to know ever more deeply the abundant life offered by the Bread of Life. For *all* who come to him he will never drive away. Amen.