



The Bread of Life (who feeds us)

Come back to that scene by the shore of Lake Galilee. It's the morning after the night before. The crowd have come looking for Jesus on the other side of the Lake. They want to know more about what happened. Although they ate well yesterday, they know they will be hungry again today. What does this miracle mean? Is Jesus able to feed his followers every day? There would be no need to work.

Jesus and his disciples have gone ahead by boat. It's late in the day when the crowds catch up with him. Jesus first encourages the crowd not to work for the food that endures to eternal life.

Then the crowd ask a different question: "What sign are you going to give to us, so that we may see it and believe you? What work are you performing? Our ancestors ate manna in the wilderness. It is written: "He gave them bread from heaven to eat" (John 6.30-31).

We meet Jesus in so many different ways in Holy Communion. Jesus is first of all the servant and host who welcomes us into the meal and spreads a spiritual banquet before us of bread and wine. Jesus is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world: we are able to come and to be forgiven because of Christ's death on the cross. We saw how the Eucharist looks back to the Passover which remembers the Exodus from Egypt and the journey out of slavery to freedom and the promised land.

But here there is another reference to a meal in the Exodus story, or rather a series of meals. The Egyptians let God's people go. They cross the Red Sea into the wilderness of Sinai, a great multitude. But straight away there are challenges and problems. The people cry out with hunger. Are they to die in the desert?

God provides. And the special bread which God provides helps us to understand the gift of Holy Communion. This bread was called manna. The



manna was given by the grace of God each night. Every morning the Israelites would go out and gather daily bread for the next part of the journey. They would gather a set amount for each person – called an ‘omer’ in the Bible – about 2 kilos by weight.

According to Exodus 16, it was possible to bake or boil the manna. It was like coriander seed and tasted like wafers made with honey. Manna lasted only for a day – except on the Sabbath when it was possible to gather enough for two days. The Israelites ate the manna for forty years - God’s provision of daily bread - until they came to the border of the land of Canaan.

Back to Galilee. We can see what the Israelites are asking here. Our ancestors ate manna in the wilderness. Yesterday we ate the bread you provided. What sign can you give to us so that we can believe in you?

This is how Jesus responds:

“Very truly I tell you, it was not Moses who gave you the bread from heaven, but it is my Father who gives you the true bread from heaven”. Note the way in which Jesus refers to God as my Father. Note the present tense: my Father who gives. This is about today not long ago.

Jesus goes on: “For the bread of God is that which comes down from heaven and gives life to the world”. Jesus is talking about himself of course. Life is a major theme in John’s gospel. Remember the words from the opening verses: in him was life and the life was the light of all people.

The crowds respond, longing for this sign, this bread which gives life:

“They said to him, “Sir, give us this bread always”. And this is how Jesus replies:

“I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.”

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Jesus himself is the bread of life. Jesus himself offers abundant life; deep spiritual satisfaction; the quenching of inner longings of hunger and thirst for meaning; for purpose; for hope and for love.

The dialogue continues. The Jews begin to question and complain. Jesus repeats and expands his extraordinary promises:

“I am the bread of life. Your ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness and they died. This is the bread which came down from heaven, so that one may eat of it and not die”. (6.50)

As the chapter moves on, we are drawn more and more to the meal that Jesus gives us, to Holy Communion, to the Eucharist:

Very truly, I tell you, unless you eat of the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you.....Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me and I in them.....The one who eats this bread will live for ever”.

There are powerful promises here about meeting Jesus in the Eucharist. As we eat and drink we receive, through faith, the body and blood of Jesus. This food and drink gives us strength for our own journey through the desert. This is not a once and for all gift like baptism. This is an ongoing miracle, an ongoing gift, like manna in the wilderness.

When we meet Jesus as the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world we are looking back to his death on the cross for the sins of the whole world. When we meet Jesus the Bread of Life, we are remembering his resurrection and the gift of life for the whole world which flows from his own overcoming of death. We are remembering that Jesus is present with us, really present with us, not only in the sacrament but in our daily lives giving daily strength. That we are invited into eternal life with God.

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Physical daily bread is important. We need enough to eat for our bodies and bread is a fantastic food. But this kind of bread is not enough. We are more than physical bodies.

Our world is living through such difficult times. We face immense challenges in this generation: challenges of war, of global poverty, of the environment, of learning to live well with new technology.

These great global challenges affect our confidence and our mental health, they sap life and hope, especially from the young. We need more than physical bread alone. The world needs desperately to hear again this good news of new life: the promise of eternity; of rich fulfilling life in the present; of food and love and nurture for the journey.

And that begins with the Church, with Christians, coming to a new understanding of Jesus as the Bread of Life especially in the great gift of Holy Communion. There is an immense and often forgotten treasure here, a gift from God, celebrated in every parish church in every neighbourhood in the land, a source of life to everyone who finds their way, because Jesus is at the centre.

When the Fourth Gospel comes to tell the story of the Last Supper, John focusses on the footwashing, not the institution of Holy Communion. He is writing for a church which already knows that story. Instead, earlier in the gospel John takes us deeper into the signs and symbols of Jesus as the Bread of Life and Jesus as new wine, as the true Vine.

So how do we meet with Jesus the Bread of Life as we come to share Holy Communion together. At the end of the great prayer of thanksgiving the priest prays in these words:

... as we eat and drink these holy gifts in the presence of your divine majesty

Renew us by your Spirit

Inspire us with your love

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And unite us in the body of your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.

This is our journey Sunday by Sunday from the place of weariness, languishing fogginess and emptiness back to life: renew us by your Spirit, inspire us with your love and unite us in the body of your Son.

There is an old definition of a sacrament which all Anglican Christians used to learn by heart, but not many now do. The words are beautiful and important even though they are neglected.

A sacrament is an outward and visible sign of an inward and invisible grace. Jesus knows that we are flesh and blood. Our faith must be more than intellectual and cerebral. There must be aspects of our worship that we can do and feel and touch and taste which are accessible to everyone. This is the reason for this gift.

The outward and visible sign here is the bread and wine which are taken and blessed and broken and given, in continuity with the manna, the feeding by the lakeside, the Last Supper. The inward and spiritual grace is the sense of the Lord's presence, of holy communion with God, of resting in God's presence which comes as we receive together, as we enjoy and appreciate fellowship with Almighty God in these moments and in what follows. God's love made visible in Jesus Christ is offered to us in this sacrament of bread and wine. We eat and drink and receive Christ deep within us, to inspire and transform us from within from death to life, from hate to love, from fear to peace, from sadness to joy.

We do not receive these gifts through an intellectual understanding. A child is able to receive Holy Communion as a sacrament of God's love just as an adult can. Someone with learning difficulties is able to find as much joy here as a university professor. We come as equals.

We receive these gifts through faith: through choosing to trust and believe that God keeps his promises, that Jesus is present as we remember in

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these powerful symbols which he chose and which he gives us, that Jesus is the bread of life.

Listen to the words of invitation which the priest offers to the people
Sunday by Sunday:

Draw near with faith. Receive the body of our Lord Jesus Christ which he gave for you, and his blood which he shed for you. Eat and drink in remembrance that he died for you and feed on him in your hearts by faith with thanksgiving.

We come and eat and in this sharing in the meal Christ gives to us we find our life again.

One of my very favourite hymns for Easter is Now the green blade riseth. It's the work of John McCrum, at one time chaplain to one of my predecessors as Bishop of Oxford. The hymn connects the themes of Easter, of spring time, of new life and resurrection. I especially love the final verse. Our hearts are indeed wintry, grieving and in pain.

I'll read the words and [here's a particularly beautiful version of the hymn](#) by Steve Winwood.

Now the green blade riseth, from the buried grain,
Wheat that in dark earth many days has lain;
Love lives again, that with the dead has been:
Love is come again like wheat that springeth green.

In the grave they laid Him, Love who had been slain,
Thinking that He never would awake again,
Laid in the earth like grain that sleeps unseen:
Love is come again like wheat that springeth green.

Forth He came at Easter, like the risen grain,
Jesus who for three days in the grave had lain;

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Quick from the dead the risen One is seen:
Love is come again like wheat that springeth green.

When our hearts are wintry, grieving, or in pain,
Jesus' touch can call us back to life again,
Fields of our hearts that dead and bare have been:
Love is come again like wheat that springeth green.

We come to Christ the host and servant who welcomes us; to the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world; to Jesus the Bread of Life who gives us food for the journey. Next time we will explore meeting with Jesus who is the vine who asks us to make our home in him. Come and see.