

Geoffrey Barnett Sermon at St Mary's Barnes

9th Sunday after Trinity

1 August 2021

Jesus said 'I am the bread of life'. What is this image of bread that he chose teaching us?

As I began to think about my sermon today, I read this verse from Paul's second letter to the Corinthians (4.18). 'We look not at what can be seen but at what cannot be seen; for what can be seen is temporal, but what cannot be seen is eternal'. Bread we can see and know is comfortably temporal, but how can we look at what cannot be seen? Jesus is taking the plain, the simple, the blessed ordinary and using this image to offer us a glimpse of eternity.

In the introduction to his book *Seeing God in Art*, Richard Harries speaks of the richness of imagery in Christian thought. 'First', he says, 'because we human beings are made in the divine image' But more particularly, he goes on 'because the divine image has been defaced by our egoism'; so 'God came among us not only to reveal his heart of love but also to show us what it is to be a true human being... It is Jesus himself who is the real image of God, the prototype that we are called to reflect. Through this true image our own defaced image is to be restored'.

And Jesus uses the image of bread to teach us about those things we cannot see but that satisfy our hunger and our thirst for all time (John 6.24-35).

We are embarked on no less than four Sundays in which the appointed gospel reading is taken from the sixth chapter of John's gospel. I think the reason for this must be that Mark, whose gospel we are mostly reading this year, hardly tells us anything about Jesus's Last Supper. He covers it in just four verses. But here we are, Sunday by Sunday, giving thanks for and taking part in that supper. So this year we are immersing ourselves in all that John has to tell us about the bread of heaven.

The story begins with Jesus seeking to get away for a moment by crossing to the other side of the Sea of Galilee. He sat down there with his disciples but John tells us that 'a large crowd kept following him'(6.2). And that sets the scene for the feeding of the five thousand, when Jesus's blessing enabled the physical hunger of so many to be satisfied. But there was no escaping the crowd and, back in Capernaum the very next day, they found Jesus once more. And we've begun to hear this morning what he had to say to them.

At first he teases them by claiming that they're only looking for him because he'd enabled them to eat their fill of the loaves (v26), but straightaway he warns them not to 'work for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures for eternal life'(v27).

The crowd get the message up to a point because they immediately recall, as we heard in our first reading (Ex 16.2-4,9-15), how their ancestors received the manna in the wilderness as a consequence of the Lord promising to Moses that he would 'rain bread from heaven'(v 4). But they still ask for a sign direct from Jesus, a sign that he proceeds to give them in the teaching of which we shall be reading in these next few weeks.

But where it starts for me is one step back from here. We must, I think, begin by examining and reflecting on the image that Jesus chooses to use – the image of bread. Of course there are other staples of the human diet besides bread, but in Jesus's Mediterranean world bread was the staple, as it had shown itself to be among that crowd of five thousand. And, in the prayer that Jesus taught us, when we have prayed to the Father that his will may be done, we ask that we should receive today our daily bread. Just that – nothing else – and not today, tomorrow and the next day, just today. This request is as simple as it sounds, but it requires us to confine it to necessities and to this present moment. And bread is the perfect physical image of what Jesus, in quite a subtle way, tells us is all we need to ask for.

And it is on this physical reality of our need for daily bread that Jesus builds his heavenly image that he is the bread of life and that, tasting this bread, we shall never be hungry. And while I need to recognise that this is as far as this profound teaching takes us today – there are three more weeks to come, as I've said – I cannot overlook that we are here this morning to give thanks for, and taste that bread of life. And, as we share in that bread, we shall be sharing in the body of Christ and going on to pray, 'may we who share Christ's body live his risen life'. Yes, that is a tall order, but that is what God is calling us to do, as we share at the altar the gift of the body of His Son. We are charged to go out from here, as we heard Jesus say in last Sunday's gospel, not to be served , but to serve.

Augustine of Hippo put it this way. 'You hear the words, 'the body of Christ', you answer Amen. Be the body of Christ that the 'Amen' may be true.'